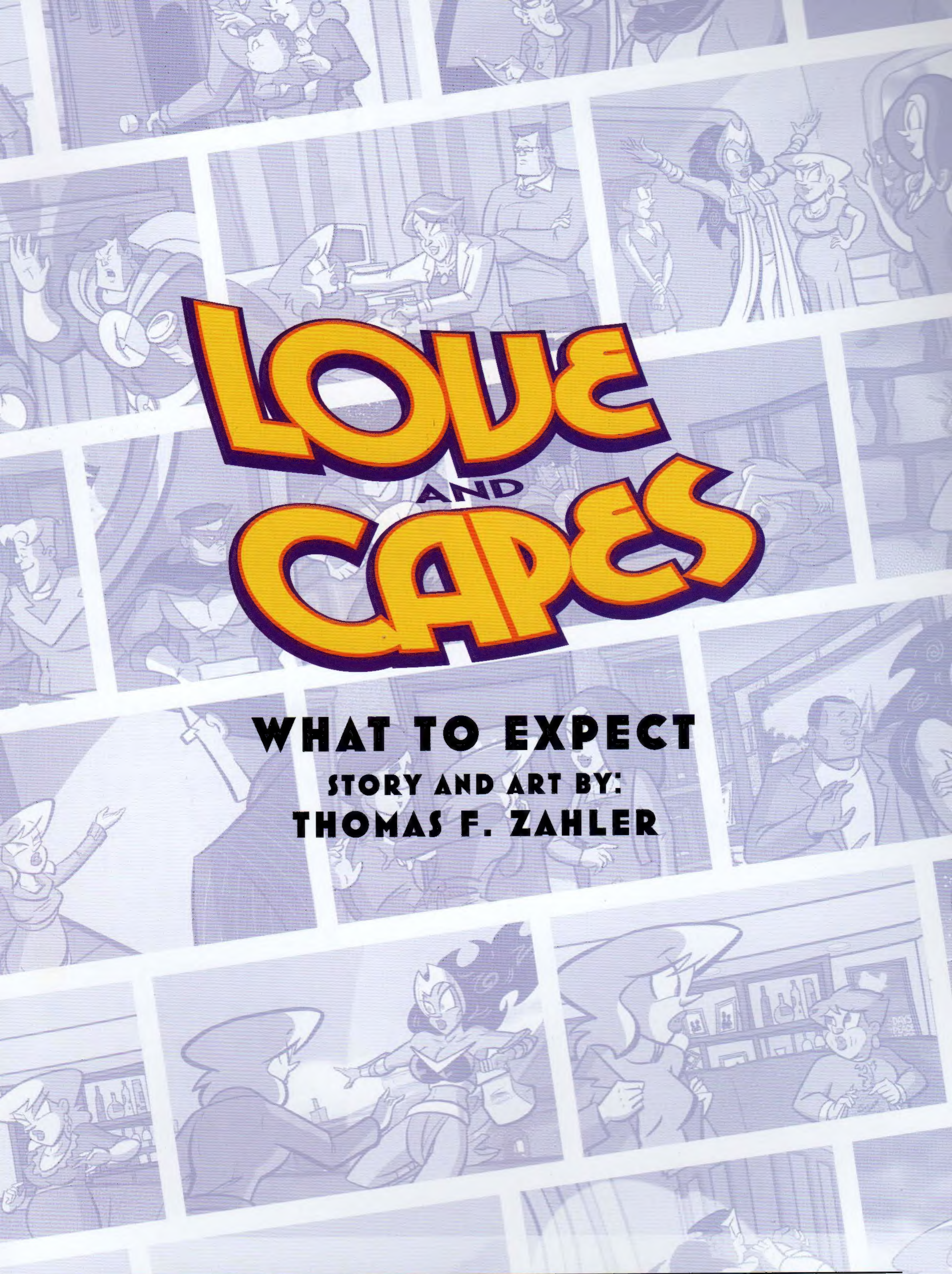
4 WHAT TO EXPECT

BY THOMAS F. ZAHLER



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INTRODUCTION

I've enjoyed Thomas Zahler's *Love and Capes* from the moment of my first exposure. But this volume, "What to Expect," really ups the ante. There's more of everything I love about it: more super-heroes dealing with real world emotional and relationship issues (in and among the tropes – often very self-aware tropes – of their genre), more humor, more drama, more soap opera and an expanding cast given more depth. Heck, there's even a little bit more action. The stakes are raised here on multiple fronts. It's not just the impending birth of Mark and Abby's baby (complete with its own countdown to heighten the tension), but also the crisis in Leandia, tiki magic and the on-going threats posed by declining sales at brick-and-mortar bookstores and by Lord Blackseed. And don't even get me started on Darkblade's – *don't call 'em sidekicks* – interns.

YES, THE WHOLE SERIES IS REALLY COMING INTO ITS OWN. NEVER JUST A ONE-JOKE WONDER, THE CHARACTERS ARE NOW TRULY EVOLVING BEYOND THEIR OBVIOUS ANTECEDENTS INTO FULLY REALIZED HUMAN BEINGS.

Yes, the whole series is really coming into its own. Never just a one-joke wonder, the characters are now truly evolving beyond their obvious antecedents into fully realized human beings. Even Quincy turns out to be a human being! Who knew? I often find myself laughing out loud at *Love and Capes*. But this time I found myself choking up – TWICE! (I'd say where, but that would amount to spoilers.)

All of this is quite welcome. The ideas here aren't lightweight – even though they're universally handled with a light and comic touch. And the engaging artwork perfectly compliments the fine writing. Thom knows how to

accompany a deadpan line with a deadpan expression. And he also knows how to show us – not just tell us – when something truly matters.

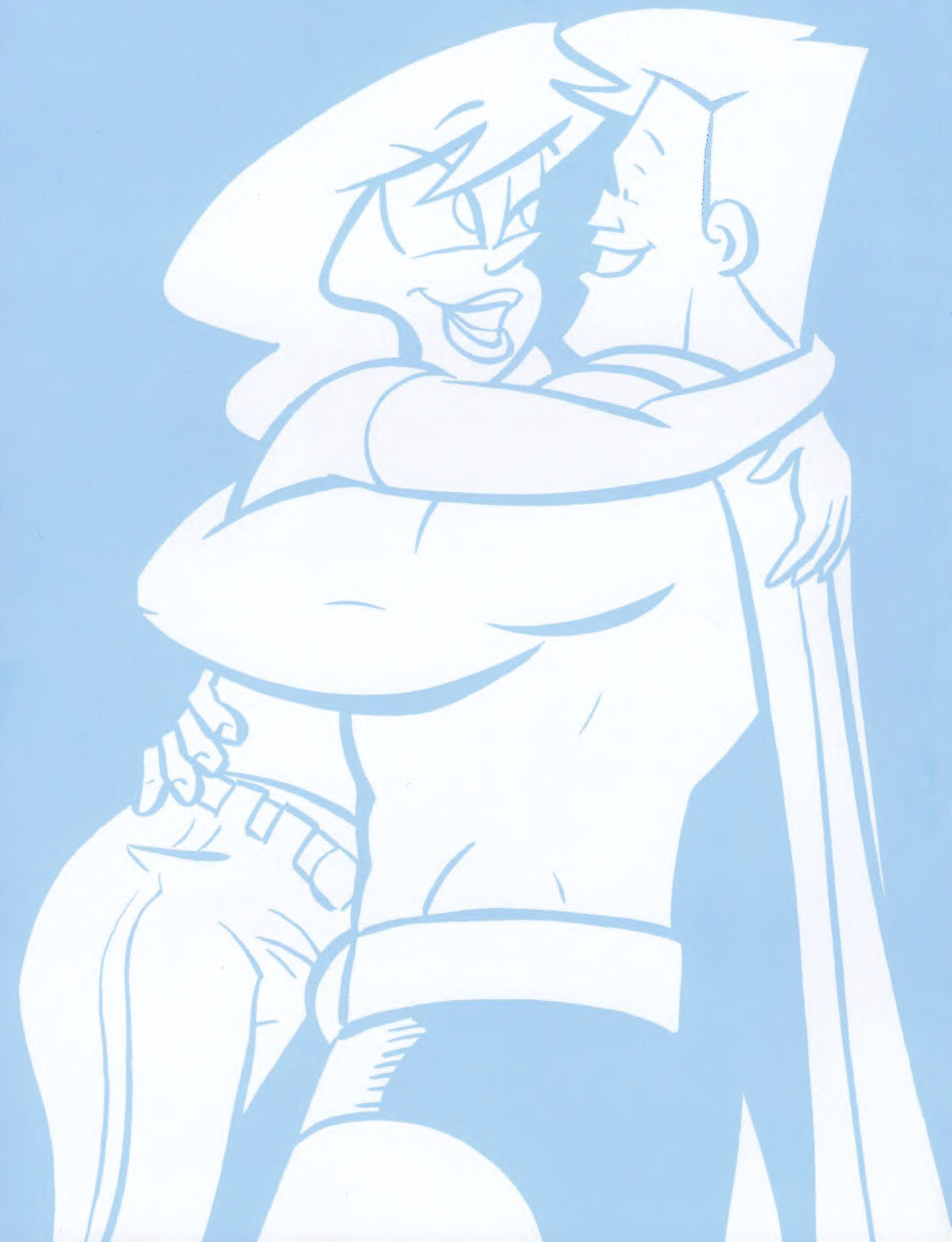
This is all the more impressive when you realize Zahler doesn't really know what he's talking about. Sure, he may know a little something about relationships and comic book super-heroes, but he candidly admitted to me that once the series headed toward childbirth as its main subject matter, he was – from his personal perspective – "writing science fiction." What does this guy know about prospective parenthood?! Nothing! But as the father of two kids of my own, I say he's written some top-notch speculative fiction here. It's believable stuff. It's real. And it's well worth reading. I mean, doesn't any super-hero comic book that gets away with mentioning kegels demand your attention?

I know, I know. All this praise. It sounds like he paid me off. But honestly, he didn't even buy me lunch. (We went Dutch.) But I do think I should provide some balance, so before I depart (on an urgent quest planted in my brain by a certain nefarious writer/artist), I leave you with this warning: reading "What to Expect" risks forcing one into making a Pink's chili dog run – and most likely without a super-powered best friend to make it for you. ***Damn you, Zahler!***

__Greg Weisman__, perhaps best known as the creator and producer of __Gargoyles__, is a comic book and animation writer, currently producing the __Young Justice: Invasion__ television series and comic book. He is also a cheap lunch date.

FOR AMY

YOU'RE MY ABBY, MY CHARLOTTE AND MY AMAZONIA



CHAPTER
1

COMIC-CON INTERNATIONAL 2012 EXCLUSIVE COVER

THAT NIGHT...
So...we're pregnant.
No, I'm pregnant.
We're having a baby.

You seem a little *less excited* than this morning, though.
I'm *still* excited, Mark, but the *reality* of this is starting to sink in, and I'm getting *stressed*.

I mean, there's *so much* to *worry* about. I want our baby to be *healthy*.
But what if she's *not*? What if she's born sick? Or what if she has *complications*?
Abby--

--don't you mean "*he*"?

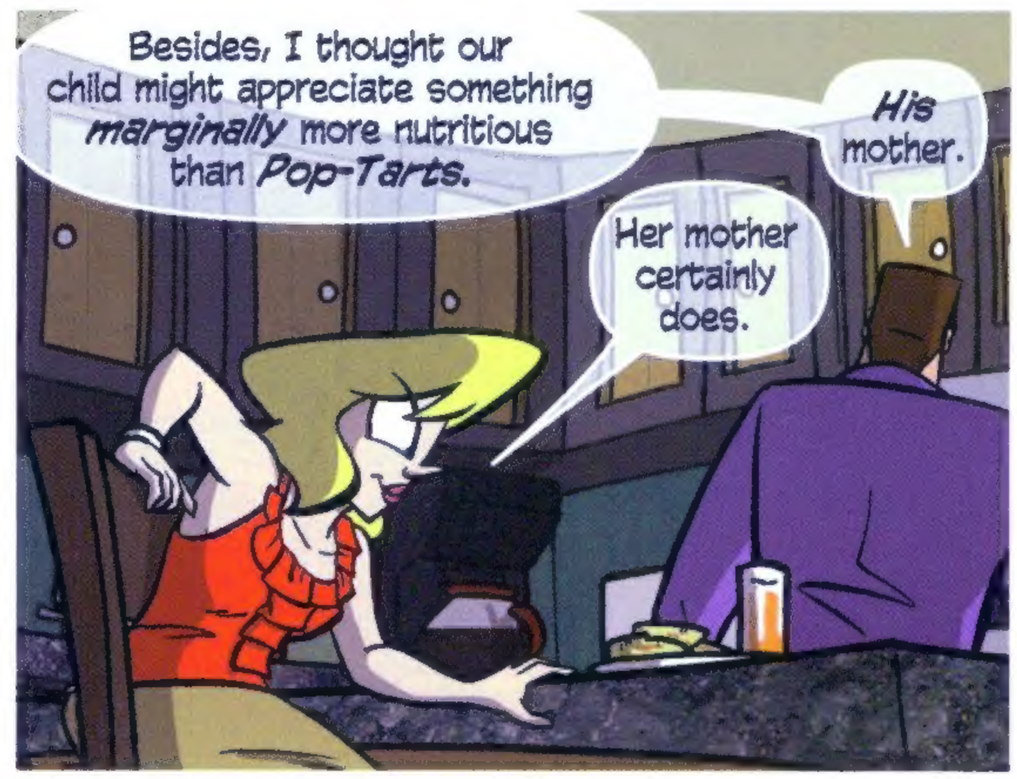
I swear, if you weren't invulnerable, I'd be *pummelling* you right now.

Look, I understand you're worried, but everything's going to be *fine*.

We've already got an appointment scheduled with *Doc Karma*. Your primary care provider can literally work *miracles*.
And, ego aside, our baby's pulling half his chromosomes from a pretty *super source*.

It'll be all right, and we'll have a very *healthy*, *happy* son.
Daughter, but you're right. Thanks, Mark. I feel *much better*.
Good night, honey.

THE NEXT MORNING...
French toast? What's the occasion?
I figured it'd be a nice start to your pregnancy.


Besides, I thought our child might appreciate something marginally more nutritious than Pop-Tarts.
His mother.
Her mother certainly does.

Could I have the syrup and some coffee?
Syrup, sure. But no coffee. Not good for the baby.

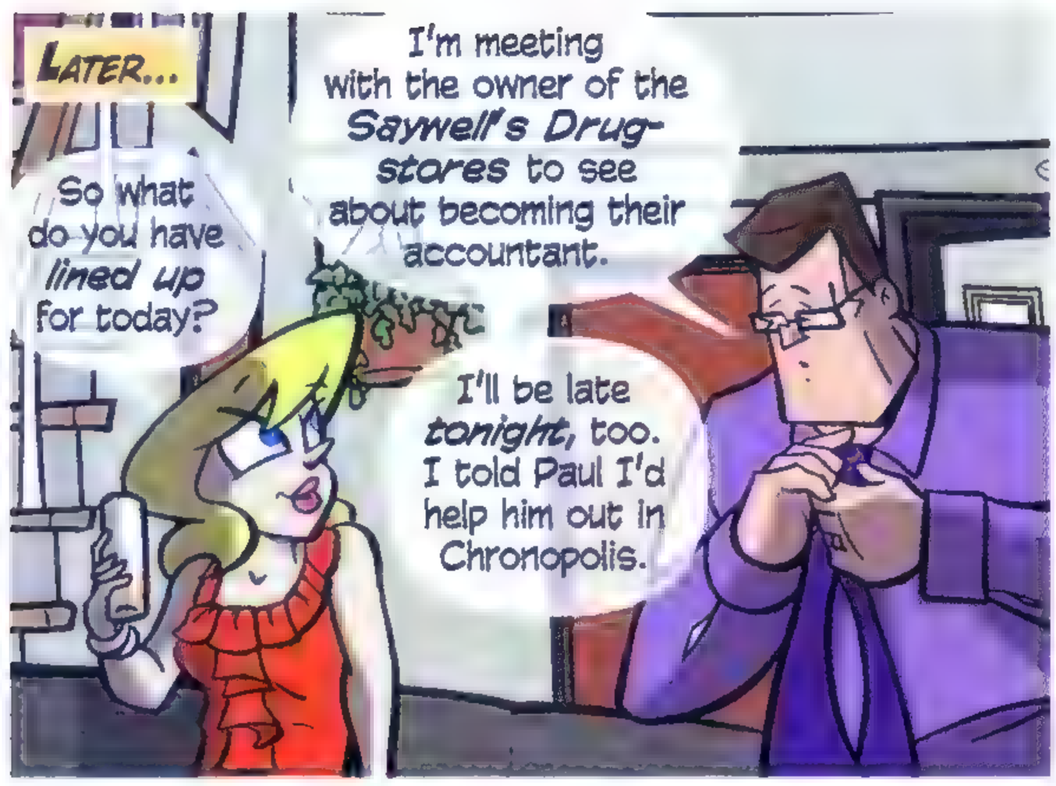
Wait, no... coffee?

Oh my God, it's just hitting me...we can't have caffeine anymore, can we?
If I have to give it up, we have to give it up.
Sorry, no--wait, we?

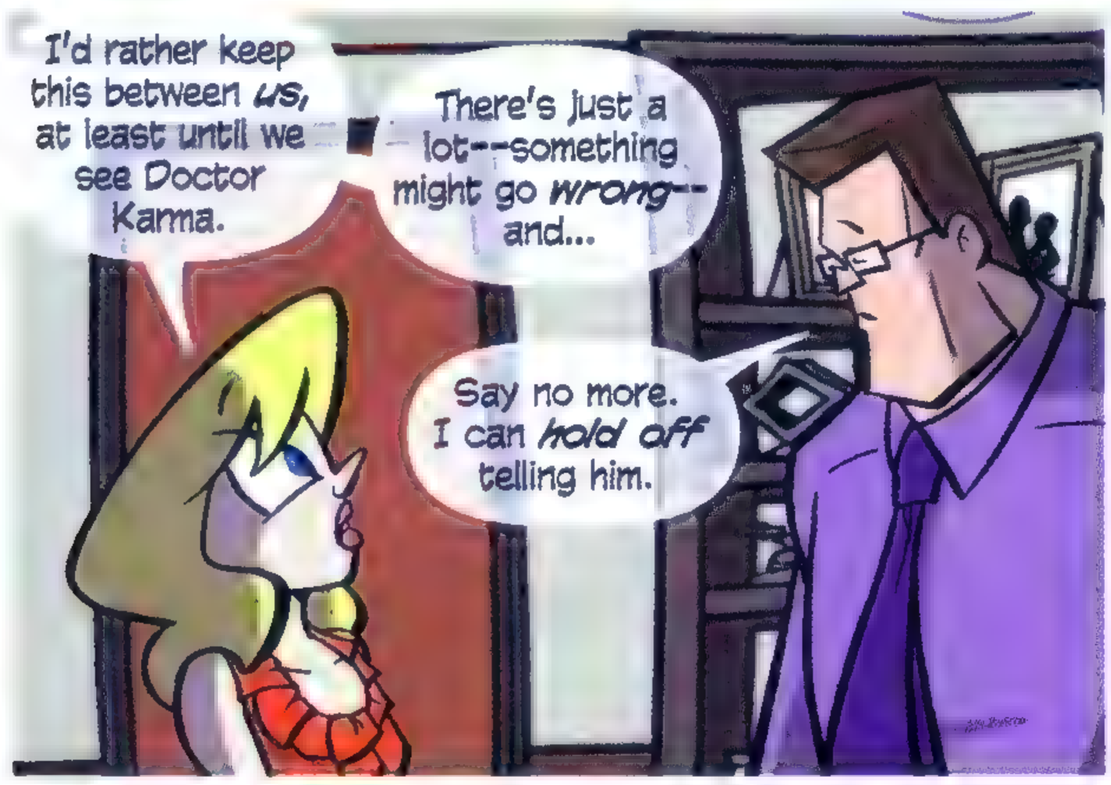
Didn't you tell me last night that you were the one who's pregnant?
Mark, I can't have it in the house. It'll be too much of a temptation.
Sigh! All right.

Thank you, honey.
So what should I do with the wine?
The wine--?

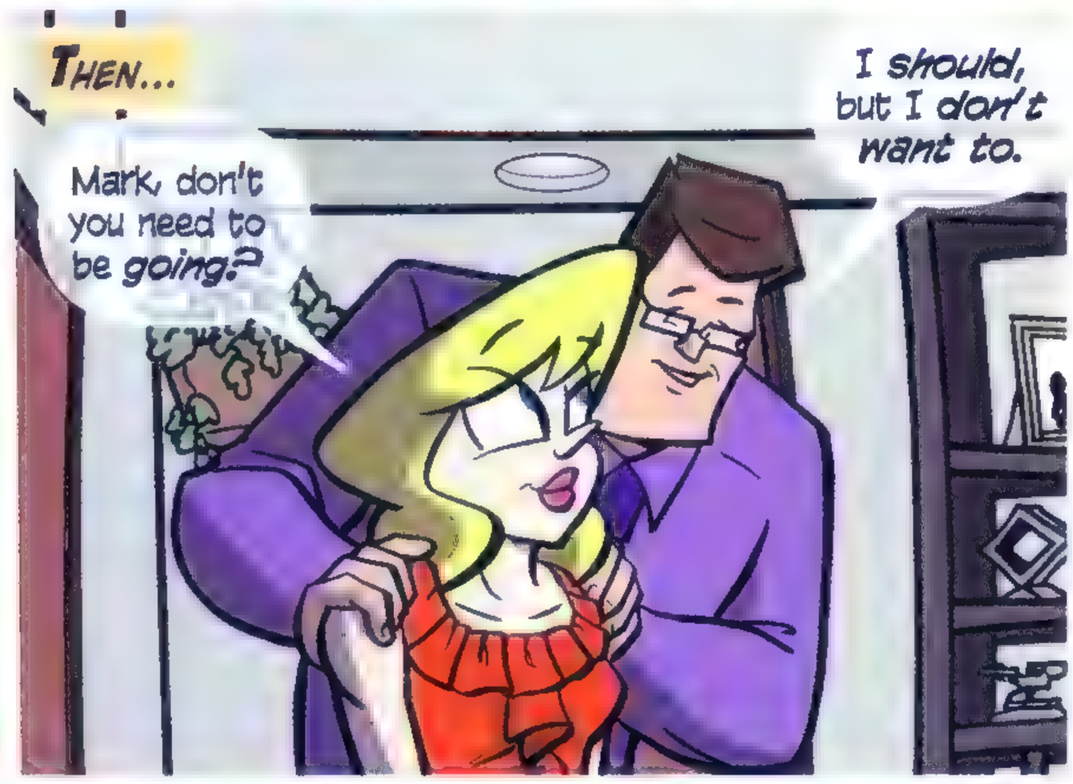
WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?


LATER...
So what do you have lined up for today?
I'm meeting with the owner of the Saywell's Drugstores to see about becoming their accountant.
I'll be late tonight, too. I told Paul I'd help him out in Chronopolis.

Mark, you weren't going to tell him that we're expecting, were you?
Tell my best friend the best news I've ever had? Yeah, the thought crossed my mind.

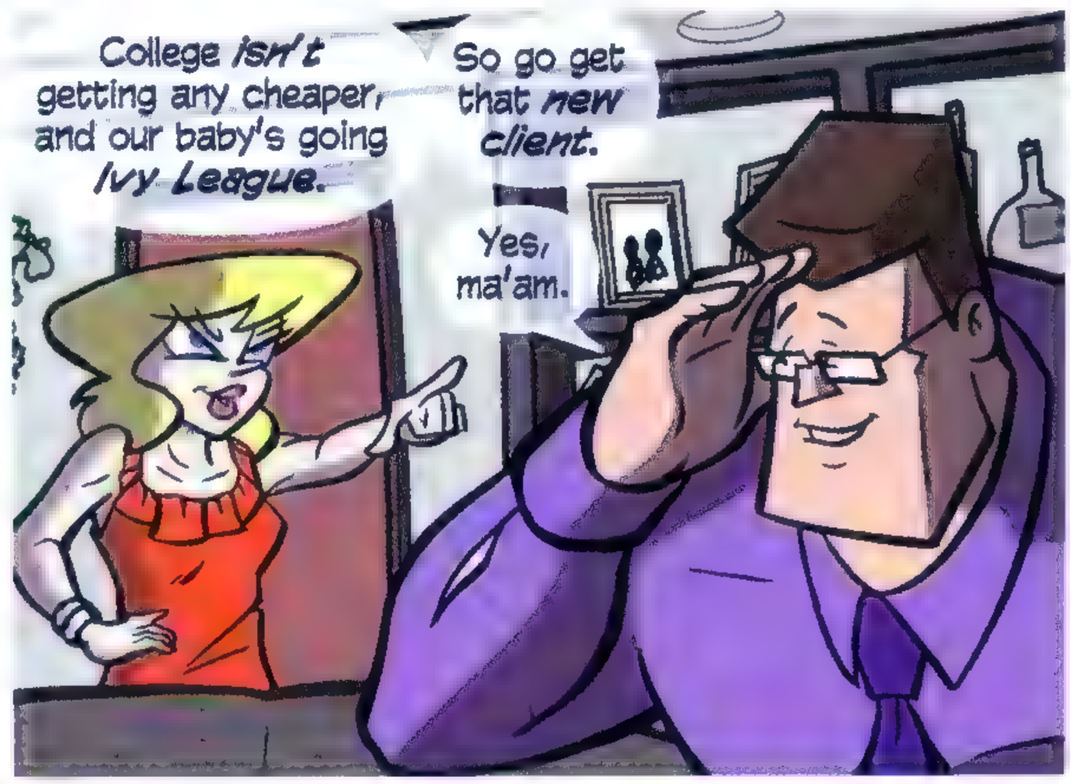

I'd rather keep this between us, at least until we see Doctor Karma.
There's just a lot--something might go wrong--and...
Say no more. I can hold off telling him.

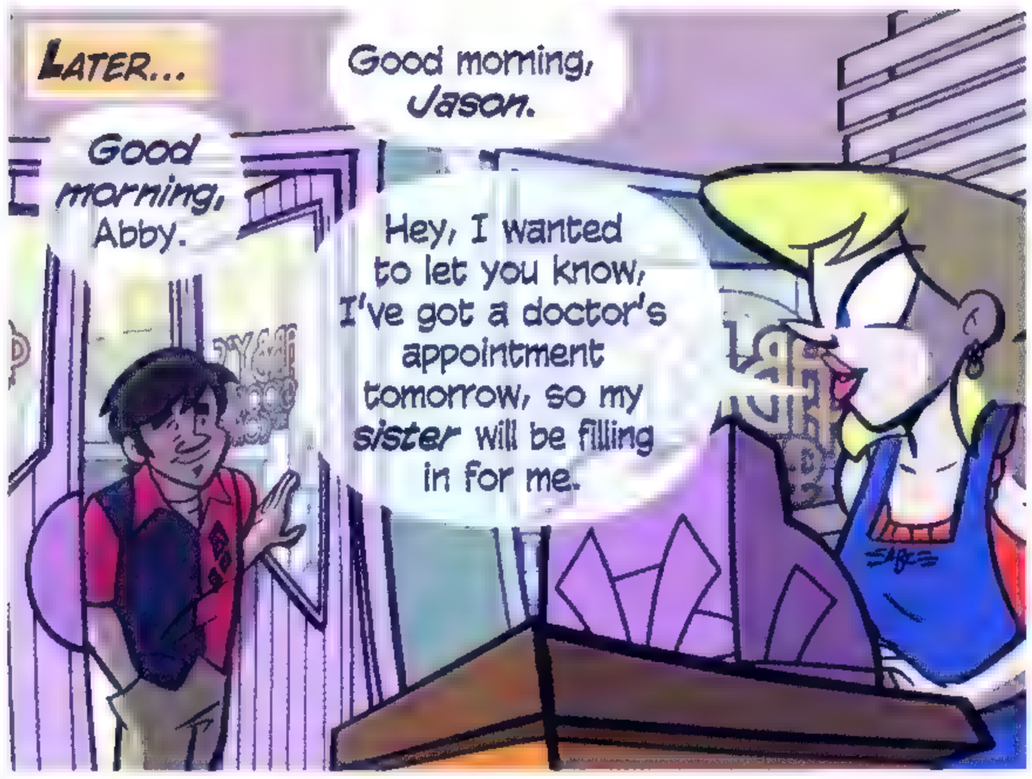
You may have noticed, I have some experience with keeping big secrets.

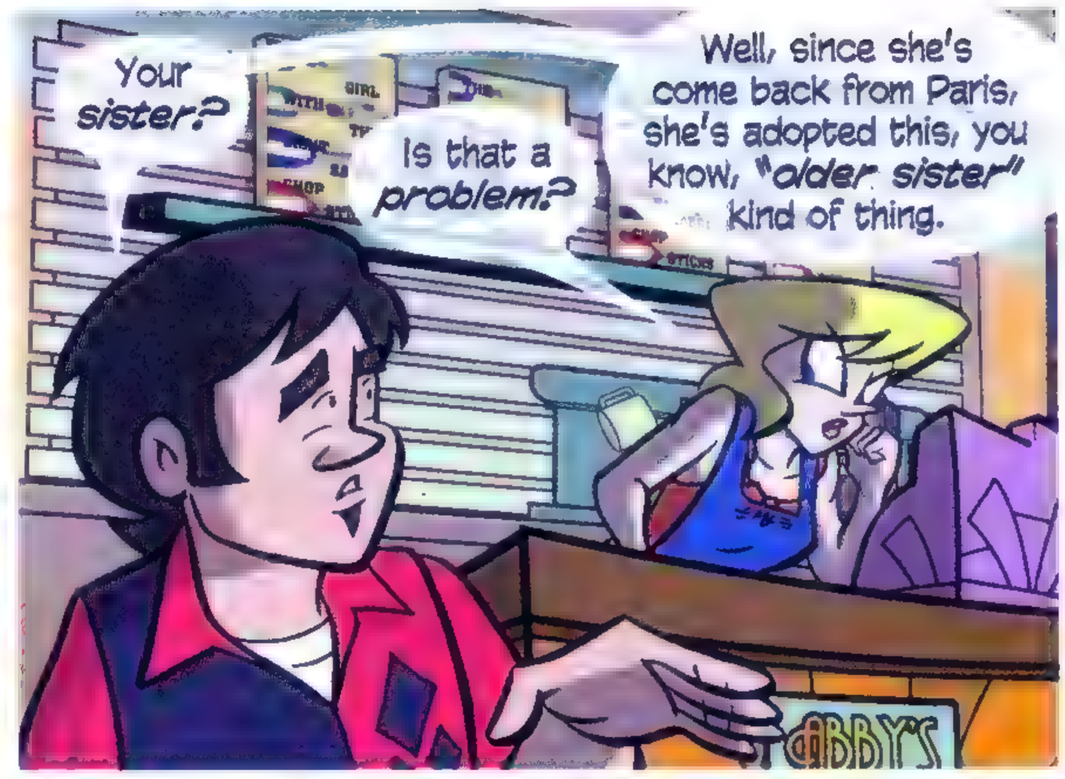

THEN...
Mark, don't you need to be going?
I should, but I don't want to.

This first morning as parents-to-be has just been so nice.
I just don't want it to end, you know?

I know, Mark.
But, there's something else I know, too.
What's that?


College isn't getting any cheaper, and our baby's going Ivy League.
So go get that new client.
Yes, ma'am.


LATER...
Good morning, Jason.
Good morning, Abby.
Hey, I wanted to let you know, I've got a doctor's appointment tomorrow, so my sister will be filling in for me.


Your sister?
Is that a problem?
Well, since she's come back from Paris, she's adopted this, you know, "older sister" kind of thing.
ABBY'S

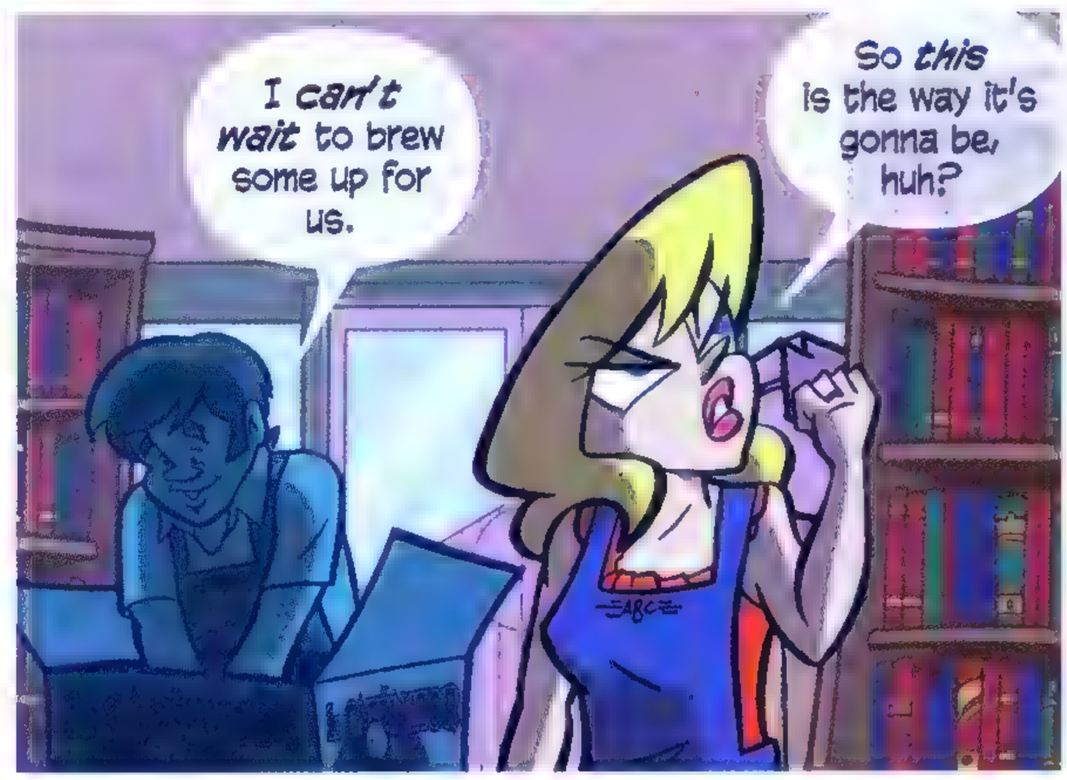
And just what is wrong with older sisters?

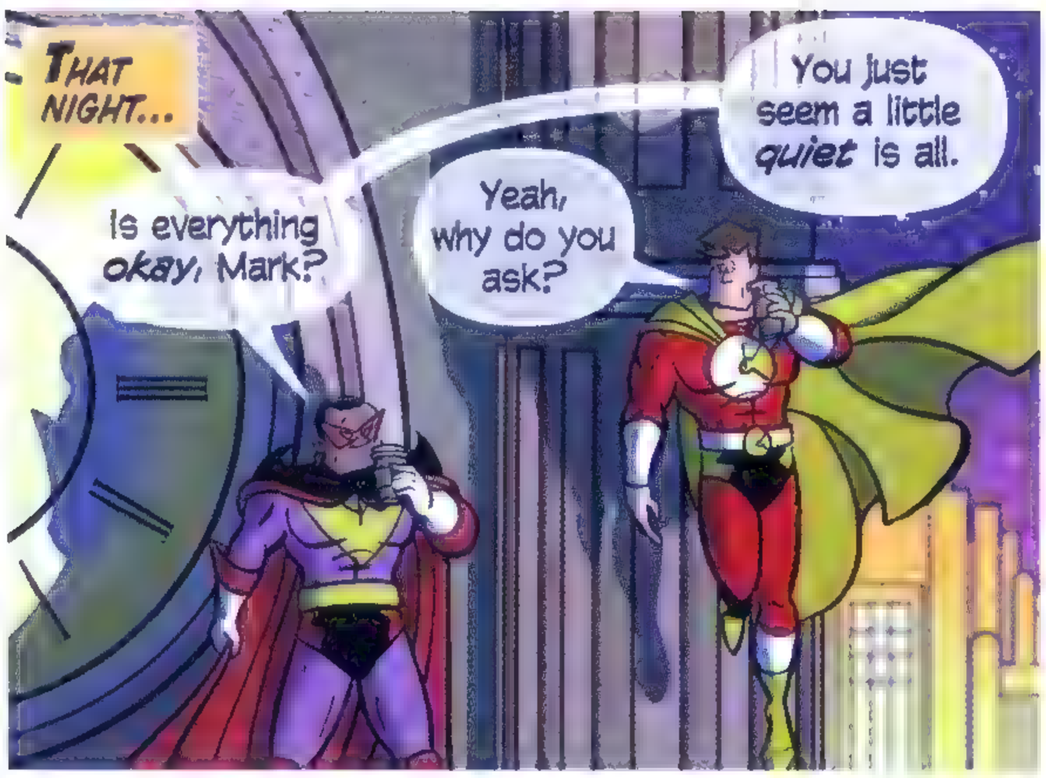
Um, nothing. They're great. Never mind.
I'm just going to go punch in.
Good idea.

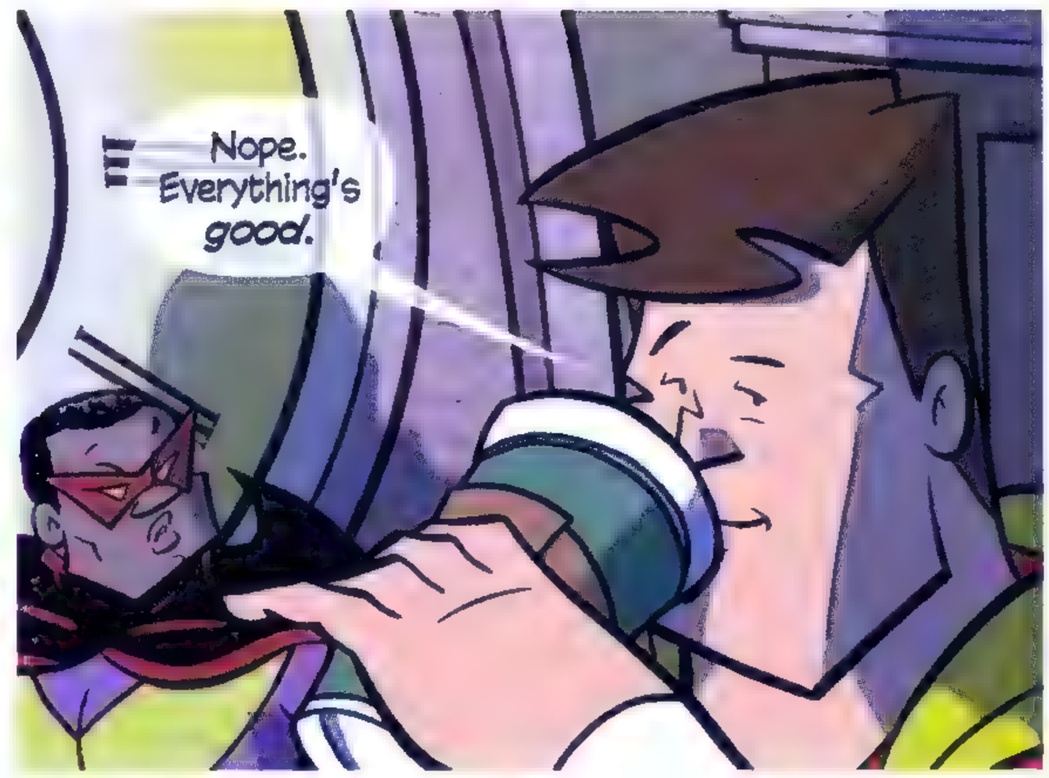
THEN...
Jason?
Abby! It's here! It's finally here!

The new coffee maker. It's been on back order since last year, remember?
You know, I totally forgot.
LE CAFÉINATOR
LE CAFÉINATOR

This is supposed to be the Cadillac of coffee machines. It makes espresso, cappuccino and regular coffee.
Oprah said her first cup changed her life.


I can't wait to brew some up for us.
So this is the way it's gonna be, huh?


THAT NIGHT...
Is everything okay, Mark?
Yeah, why do you ask?
You just seem a little quiet is all.

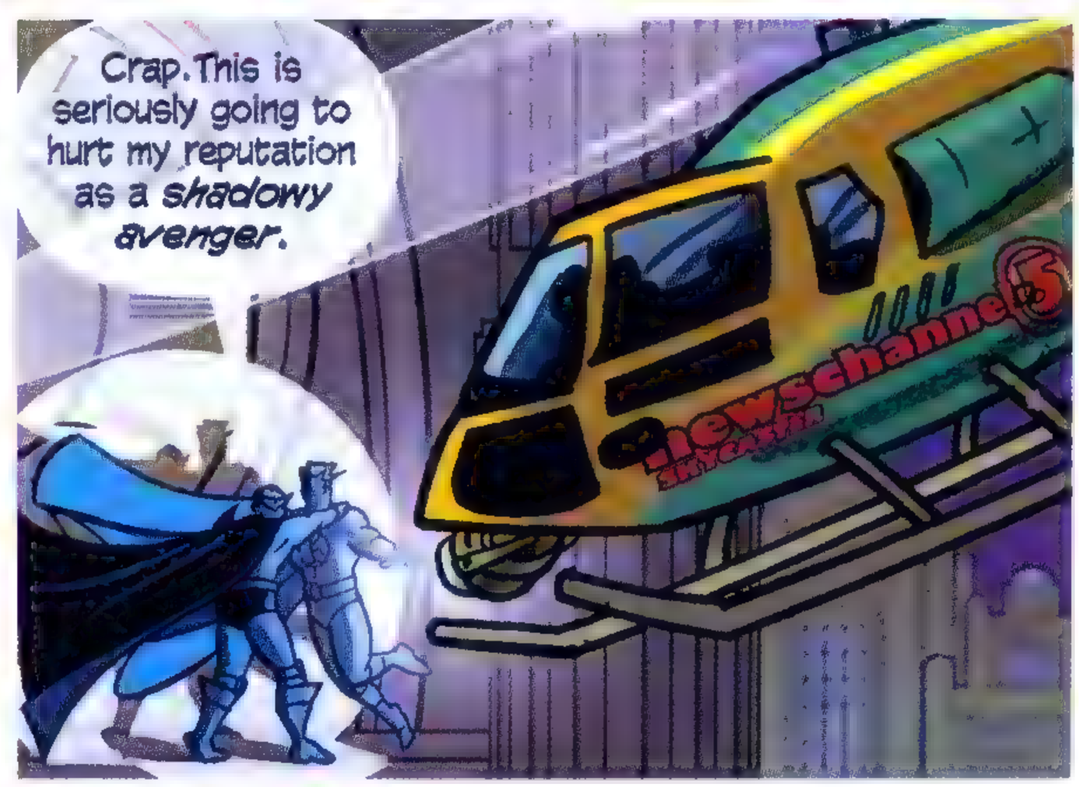

Nope. Everything's good.

Oh my God, Abby's PREGNANT?!
How do you do that?

So I'm right? You two are having a baby.
Yes, we are.

This is wonderful! My best friend is going to be a father! I'm going to be an uncle. The cool rich uncle!
C'mere, dude--

This is the best news--
Um, Darkblade...


Crap. This is seriously going to hurt my reputation as a shadowy avenger.
newschannel 5

Don't be too hard on yourself, Mark. You *can't* be blamed for giving up the secret.
Oh, *really?*

Of course not. The monks honed my deductive skills to a *razor-sharp edge.*

I can put together *clues* other people don't even realize *are* clues and be steps ahead.

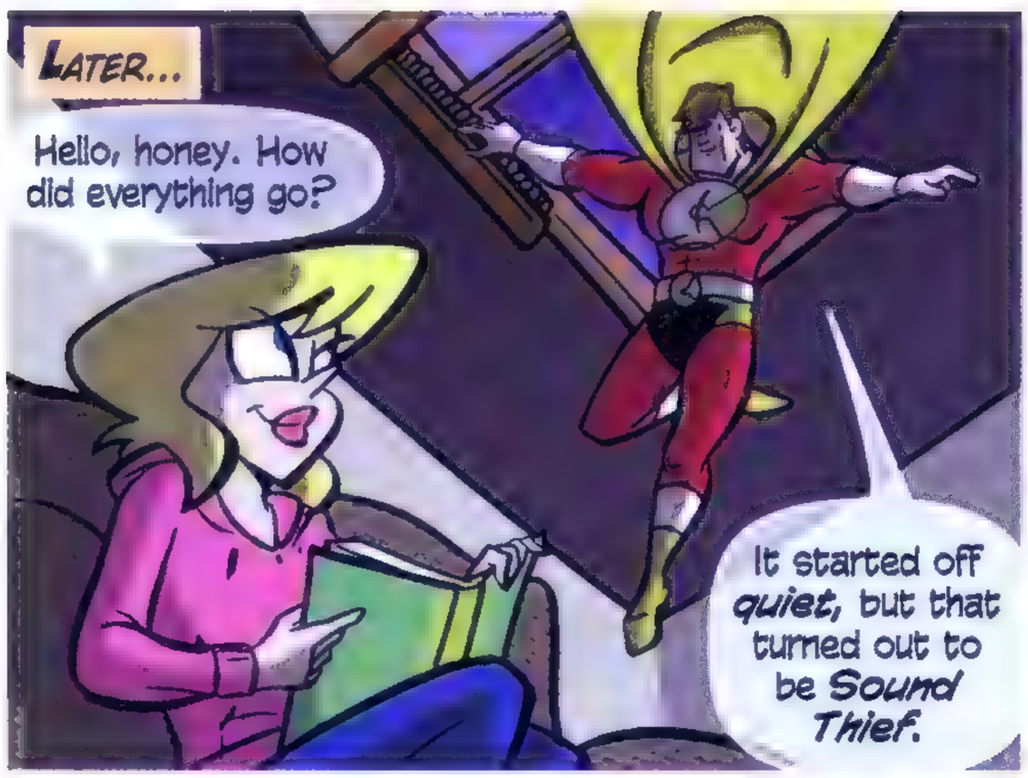
And yet the mystery of The Island on *Lost* eluded you for *six seasons.*
That's because it didn't make any *freaking sense!* A *well* with a *giant plug?* What was *that?*

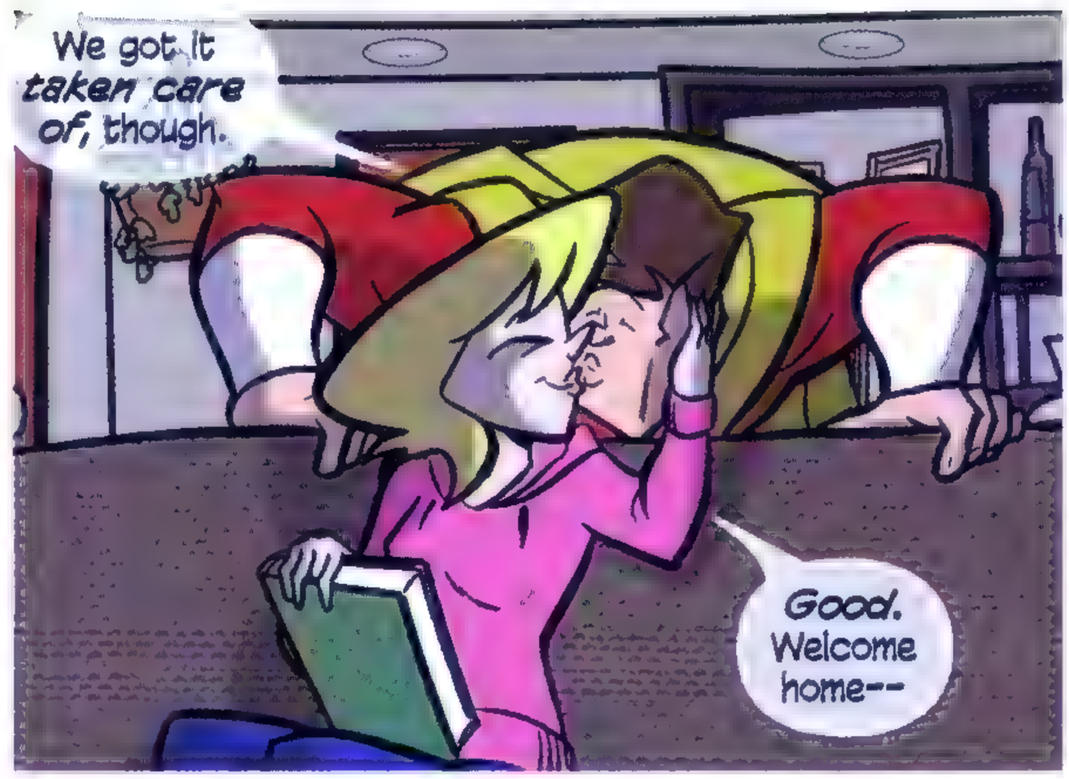
Anyway, you've scheduled an appointment with *Doctor Karma,* right?
First thing I did.

Abby's been doing pretty well, but she's had *occasional* moments of panic.
I'm hoping he'll be able to *ease* some of her concerns.

I'm sure she's got a *mountain* of them. Health issues. Future issues. Hero issues.
Hero issues?
Sure--

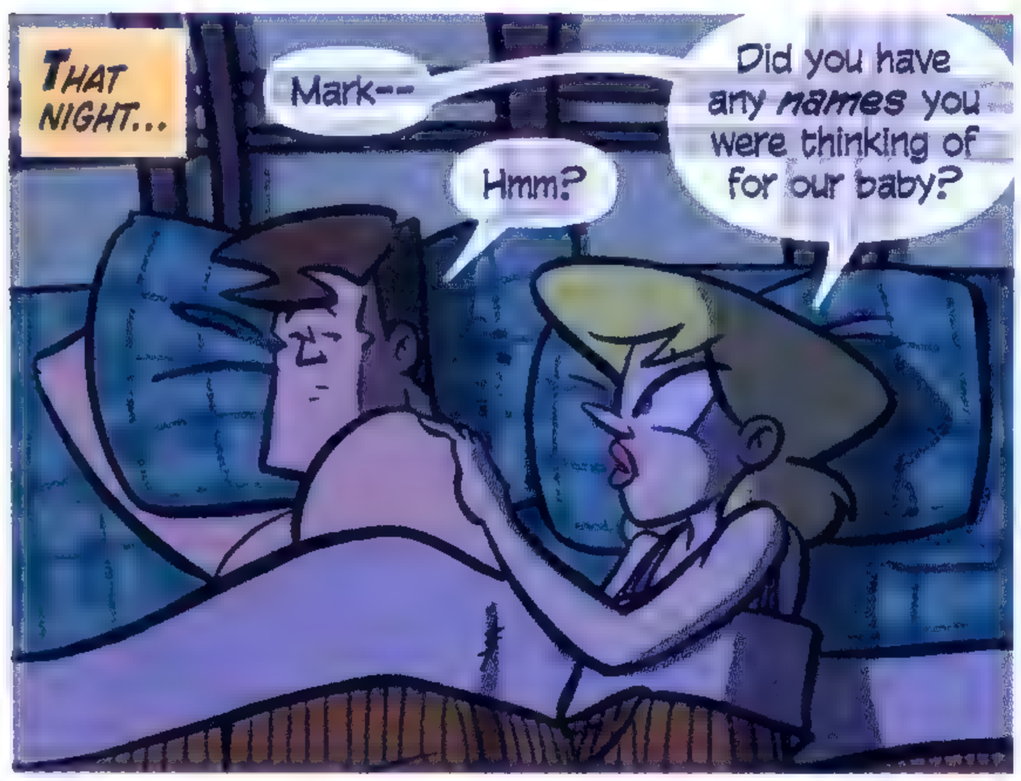
--the baby could be kidnapped and taken to the *future,* aged and become your *greatest enemy,* turn out to be a *magical construct...*
You are *not* helping.

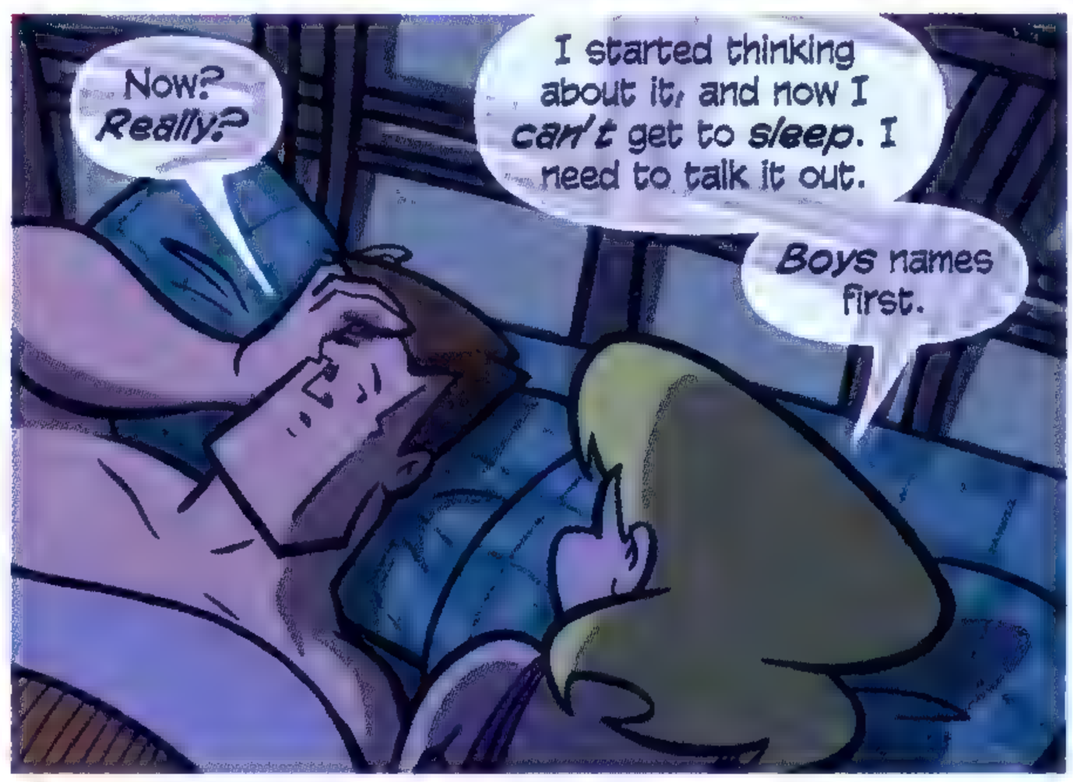

LATER...
Hello, honey. How did everything go?
It started off quiet, but that turned out to be Sound Thief.

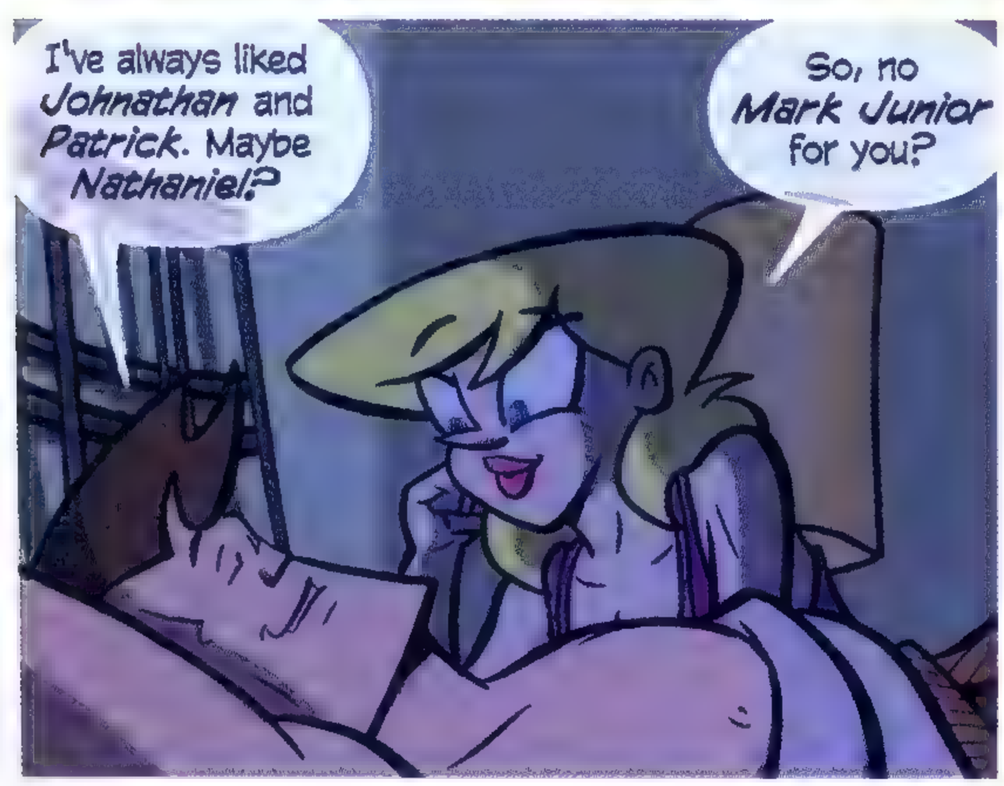

We got it taken care of, though.
Good. Welcome home--

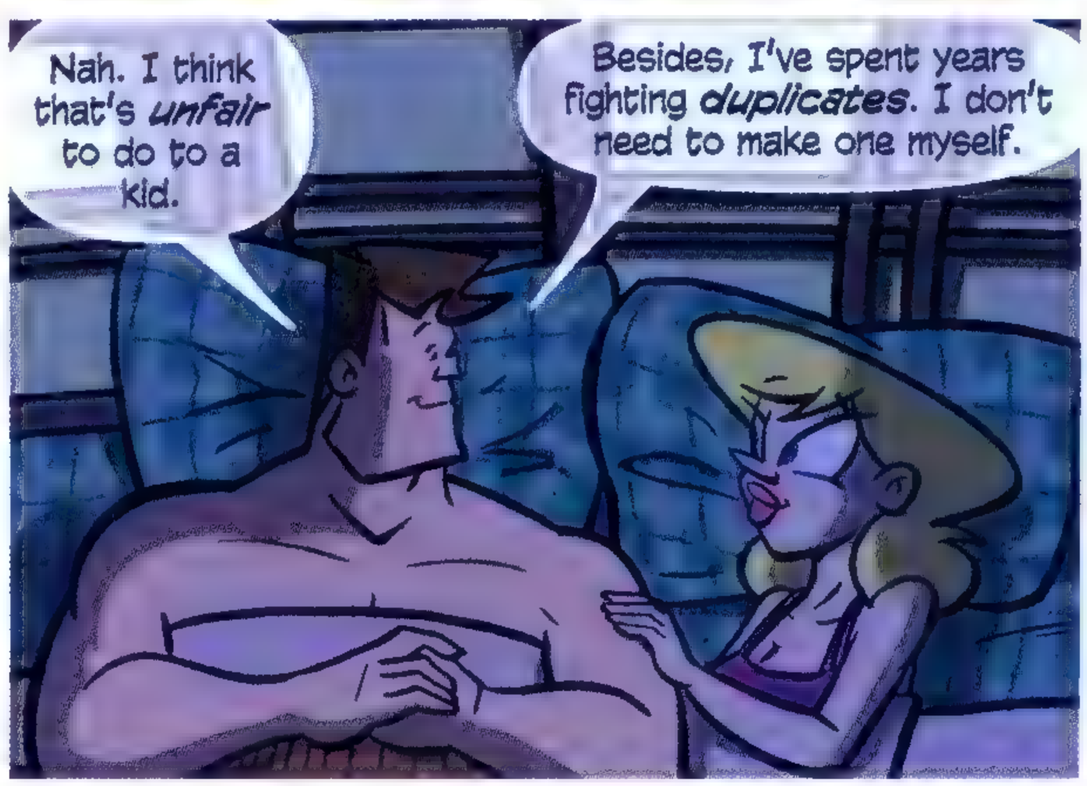
--mmm mmm!

You could taste the coffee, couldn't you?
Could you get a cinnamon spice latte next time?


THAT NIGHT...
Mark--
Hmm?
Did you have any names you were thinking of for our baby?


Now? Really?
I started thinking about it, and now I can't get to sleep. I need to talk it out.
Boys names first.


I've always liked Johnathan and Patrick. Maybe Nathaniel?
So, no Mark Junior for you?


Nah. I think that's unfair to do to a kid.
Besides, I've spent years fighting duplicates. I don't need to make one myself.

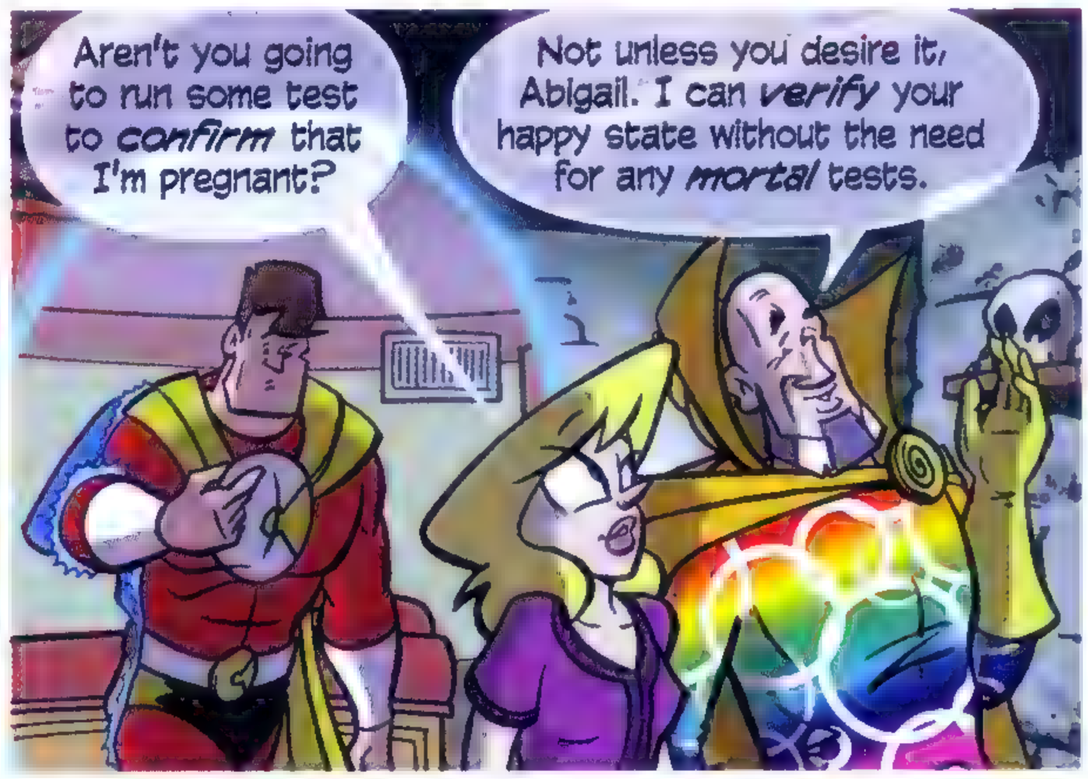
THE NEXT DAY...
Abigail, Mark, my assistant *scheduled* you but did not note why.
So what--

--oh.

Zounds! You are *pregnant!* My congratulations!

Reading our *minds*, Doc?
No, just your *faces*.

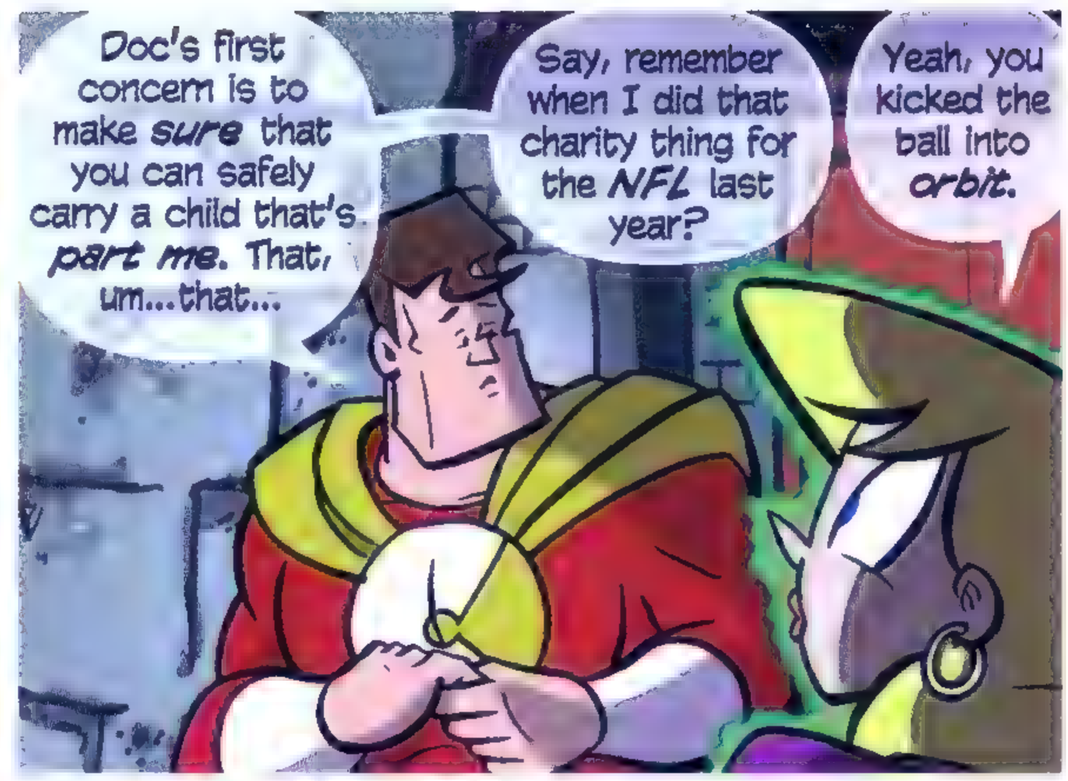
The rest of this discussion is best held at my *"other"* office.
Shall we?


Aren't you going to run some test to *confirm* that I'm pregnant?
Not unless you desire it, Abigail. I can *verify* your happy state without the need for any *mortal* tests.

I can adjust my *arcane senses* to perceive the *spark of life*.
And I see that *two* lives reside in you.
Your child's light burns *strong* and *healthy*--

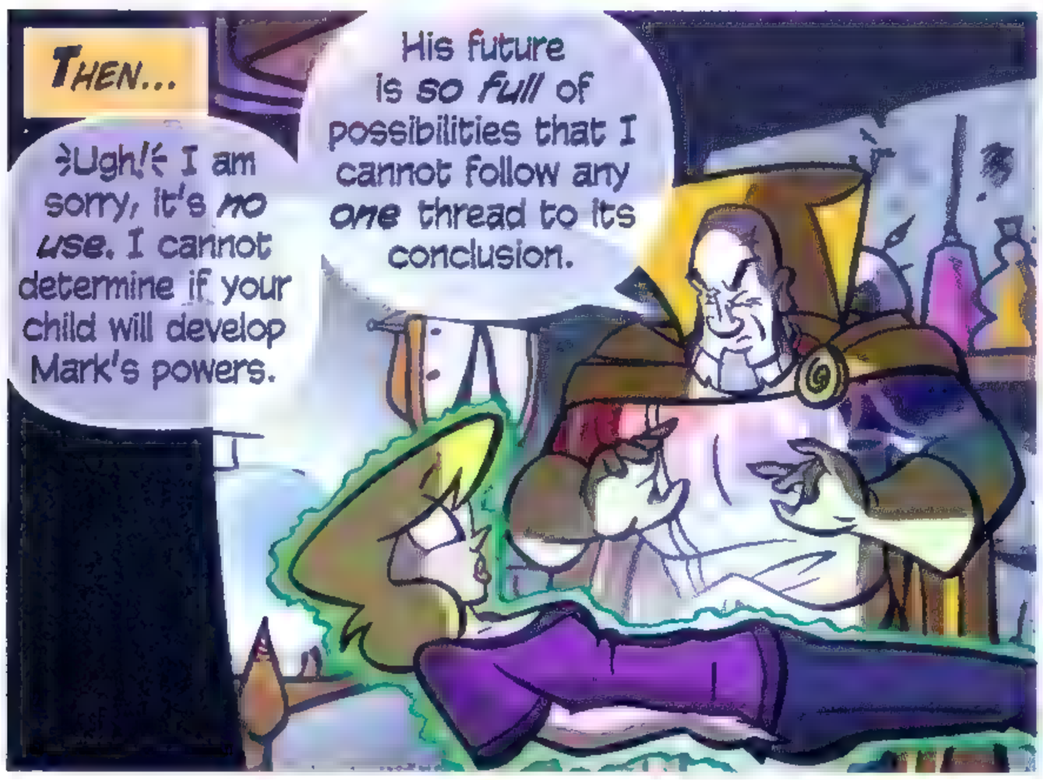
--and so we must take steps to ensure that *your* light remains so, as well.
Wait, *what*--?

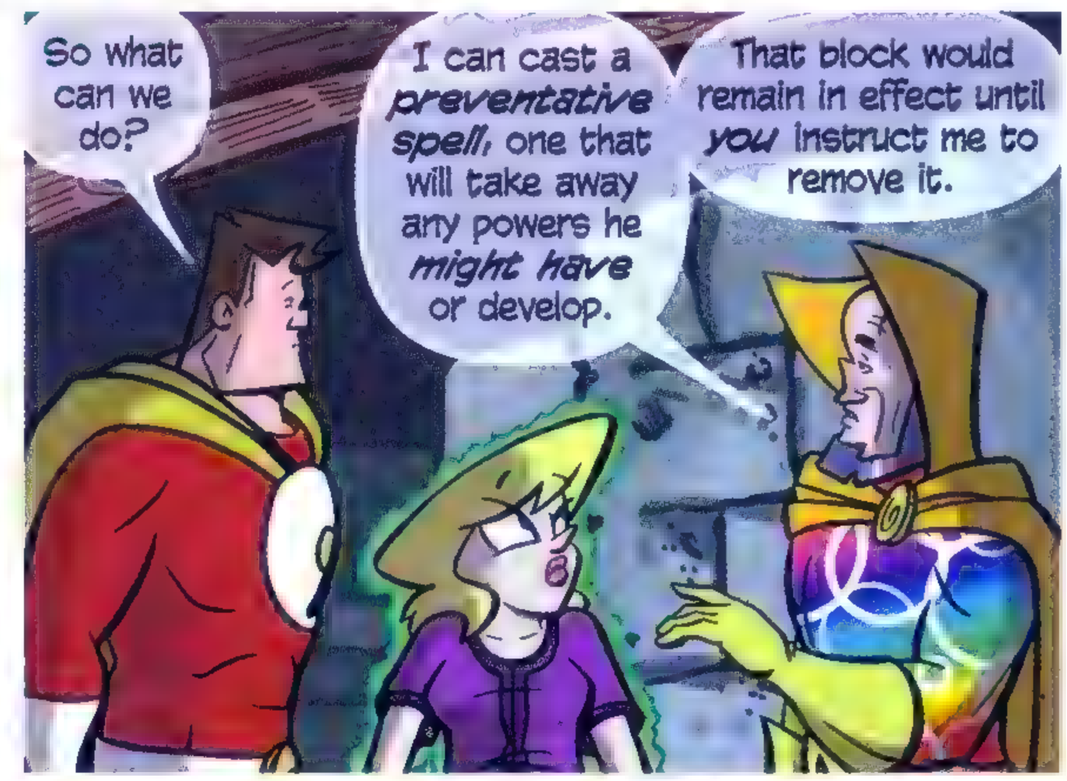
Doc? Why are you worried about *my* health?
Mark, I must *concentrate* to prepare this spell. If *you* would be so kind as to explain my concerns to Abigail...


Doc's first concern is to make *sure* that you can safely carry a child that's *part me*. That, um...that...
Say, remember when I did that charity thing for the *NFL* last year?
Yeah, you kicked the ball into *orbit*.

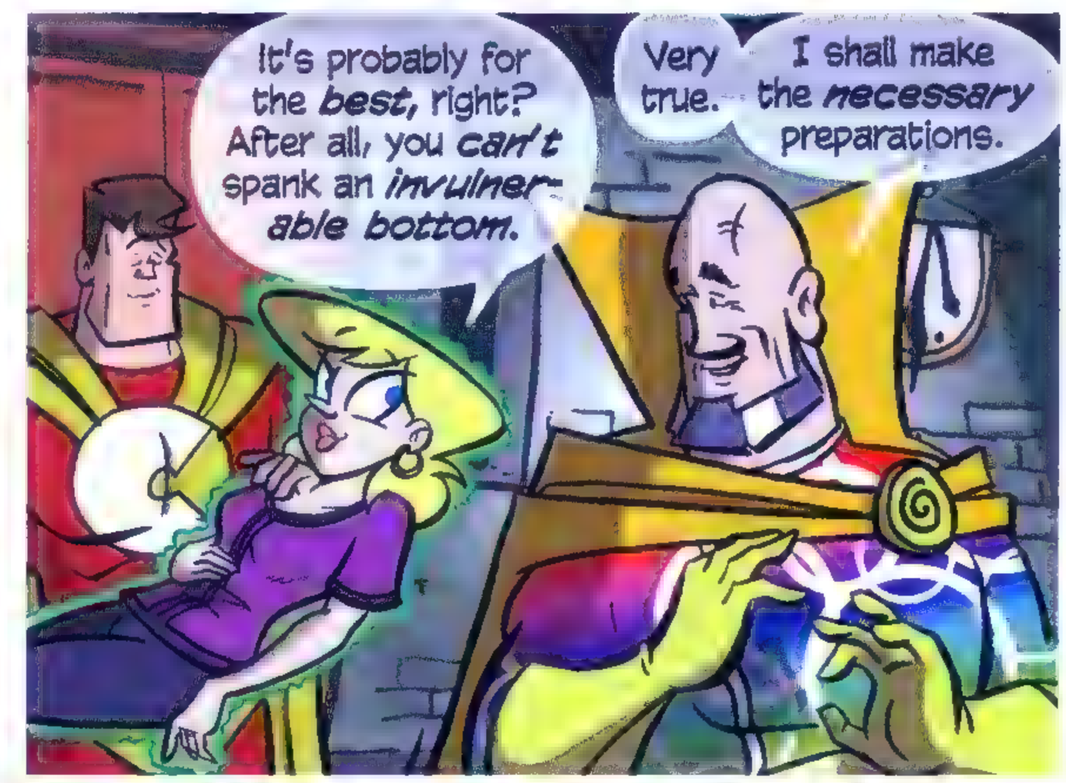
Babies kick, too.
Oh.

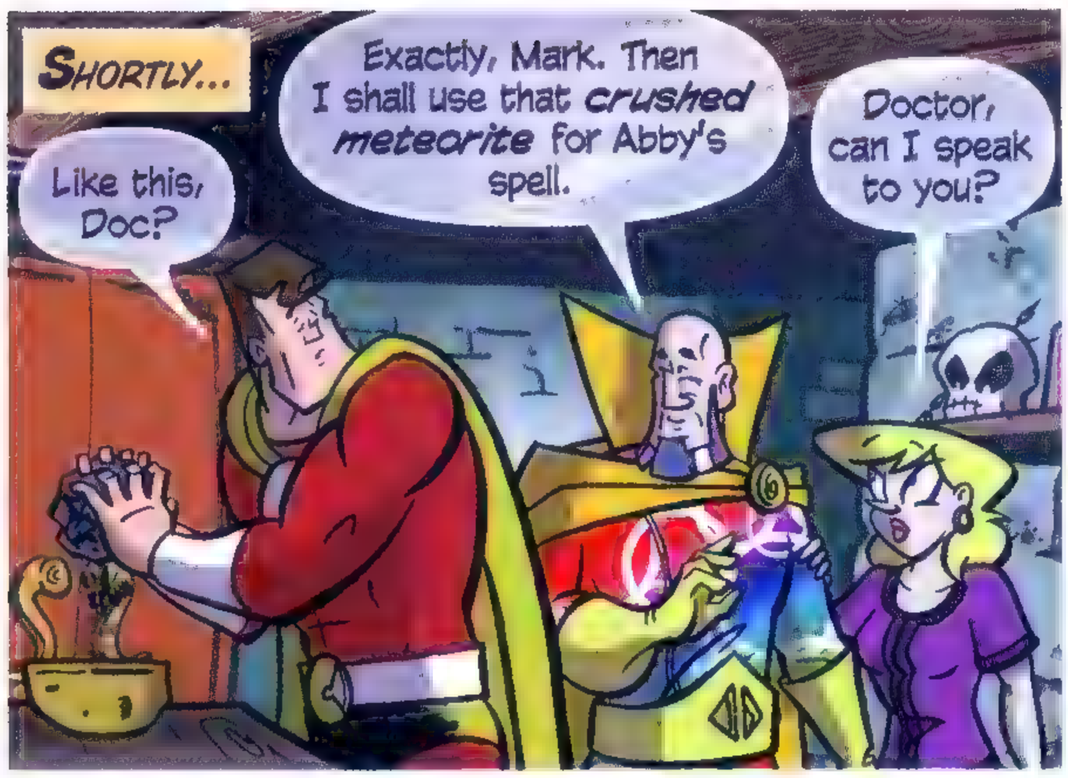
Okay, now *I'm* worried about the health of the mother, too!
Let's fix this!


THEN...
¾Ugh!¿ I am sorry, it's *no use*. I cannot determine if your child will develop Mark's powers.
His future is *so full* of possibilities that I cannot follow any *one* thread to its conclusion.


So what can we do?
I can cast a *preventative spell*, one that will take away any powers he *might have* or develop.
That block would remain in effect until *you* instruct me to remove it.

What do *you* think, Abby? It *would* keep you safe.
Part of me feels like we're denying him his *heritage*. But I think it's the thing we need to do. For *both* of us.


It's probably for the *best*, right? After all, you *can't* spank an *invulnerable bottom*.
Very true.
I shall make the *necessary* preparations.


SHORTLY...
Like this, Doc?
Exactly, Mark. Then I shall use that *crushed meteorite* for Abby's spell.
Doctor, can I speak to you?

What troubles you, Abigail?
Yes?
I appreciate everything you're doing for our baby. But for some of the more...*normal* aspects of my pregnancy--
--well, I'd prefer to have a female doctor. No slight to you, of course.

Worry not, Abigail. Your request neither *offends* nor *surprises* me.
Grant me a *few minutes*, and I will allay *all* your concerns!

And yet, I'm now even *more concerned*.

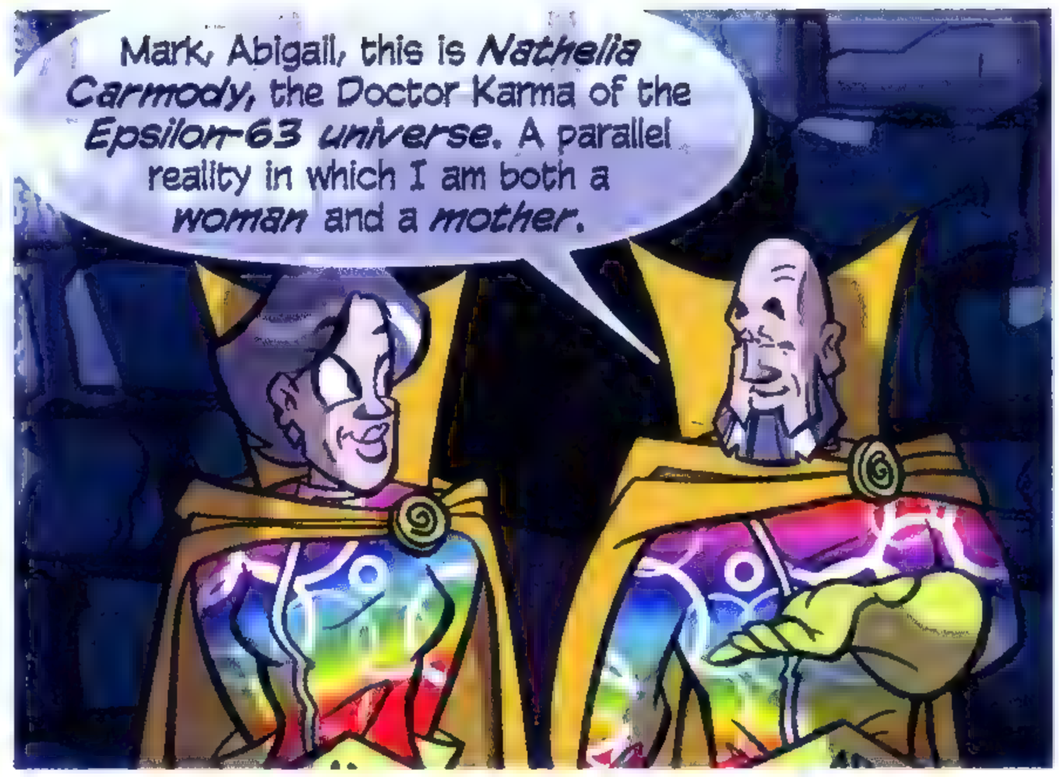
THEN...
Mark, have you seen Doctor Karma? He went to go do... *something*...and I haven't seen him since.

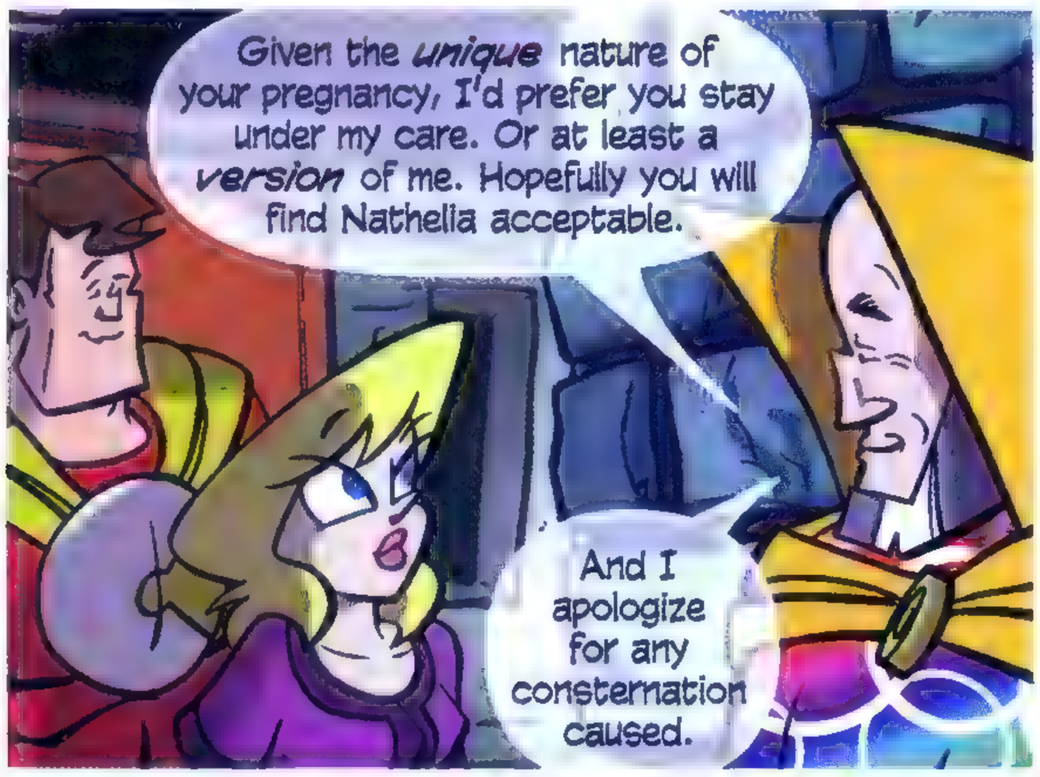
He's not *here*. I was just about to look for him myself.
Then *look no further*, for here I am.

It is I...
DOCTOR KARMA!
Though *not* as *you* know me.

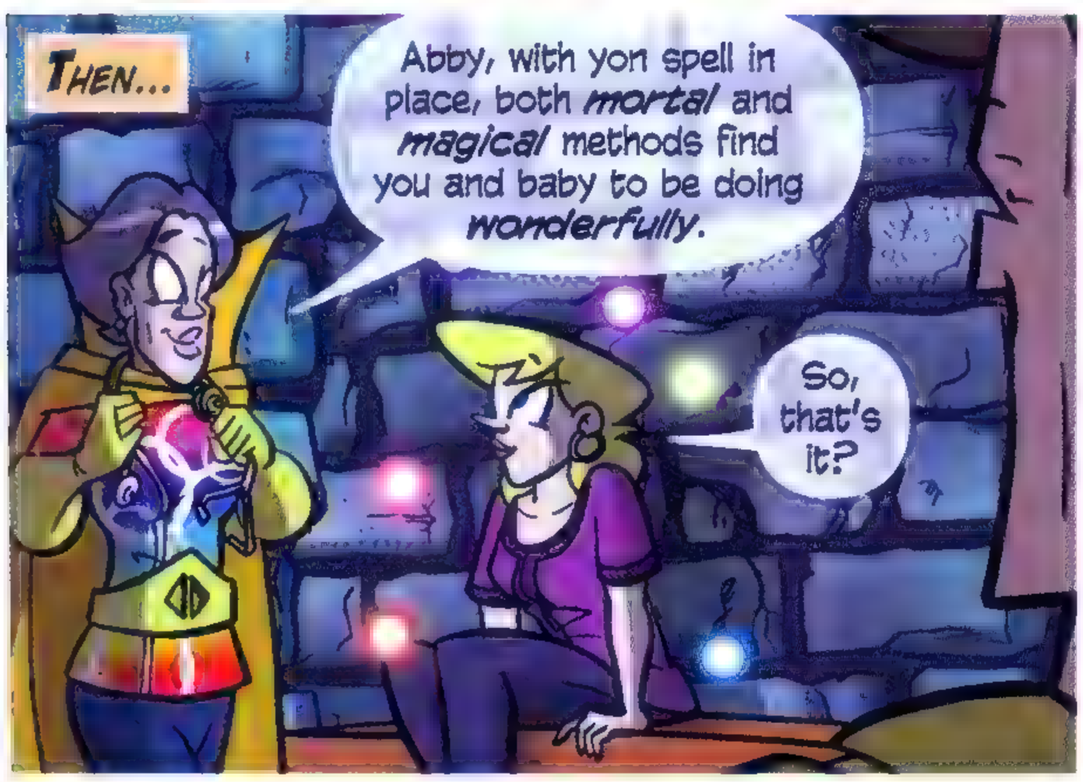
That is *soooo* not what I meant.

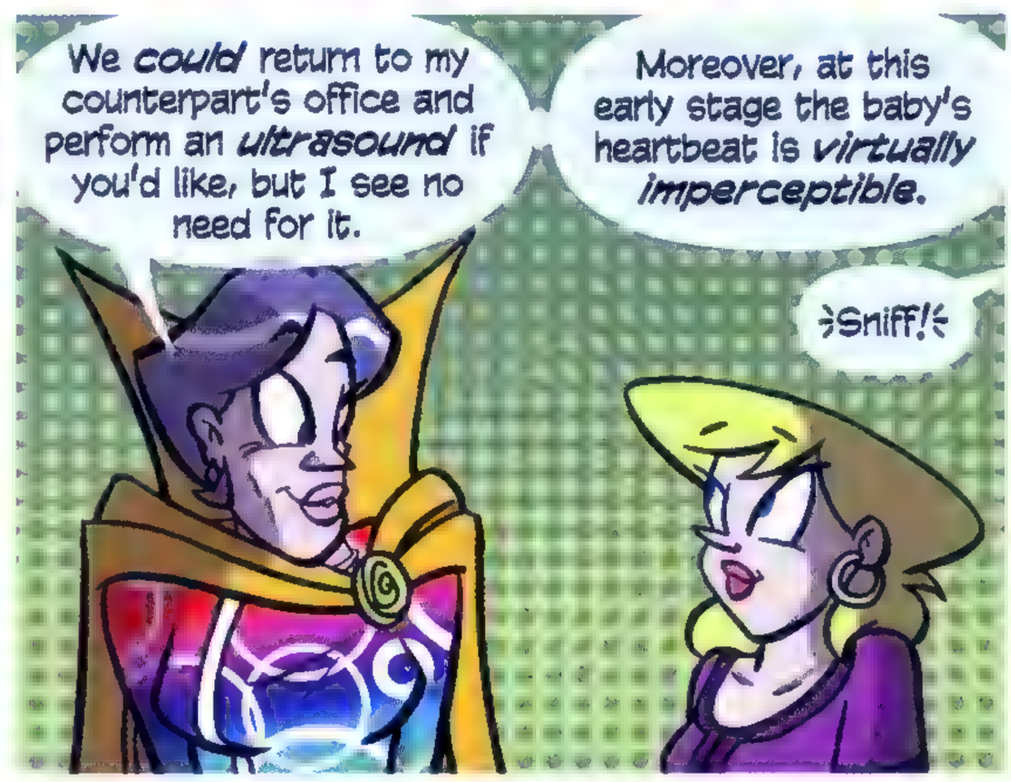
Doc, *what* did you do...?
Hah! You see, Mark, I--
Oh, *there* you are!


Mark, Abigail, this is *Nathelia Carmody*, the Doctor Karma of the *Epsilon-63 universe*. A parallel reality in which I am both a *woman* and a *mother*.


Given the *unique* nature of your pregnancy, I'd prefer you stay under my care. Or at least a *version* of me. Hopefully you will find Nathelia acceptable.
And I apologize for any consternation caused.

Of course, if someone would have *waited* for me to seal the dimensional vortex...
But then it wouldn't have been *funny*.
Ah, so in your universe I am also quite the *prankster*.

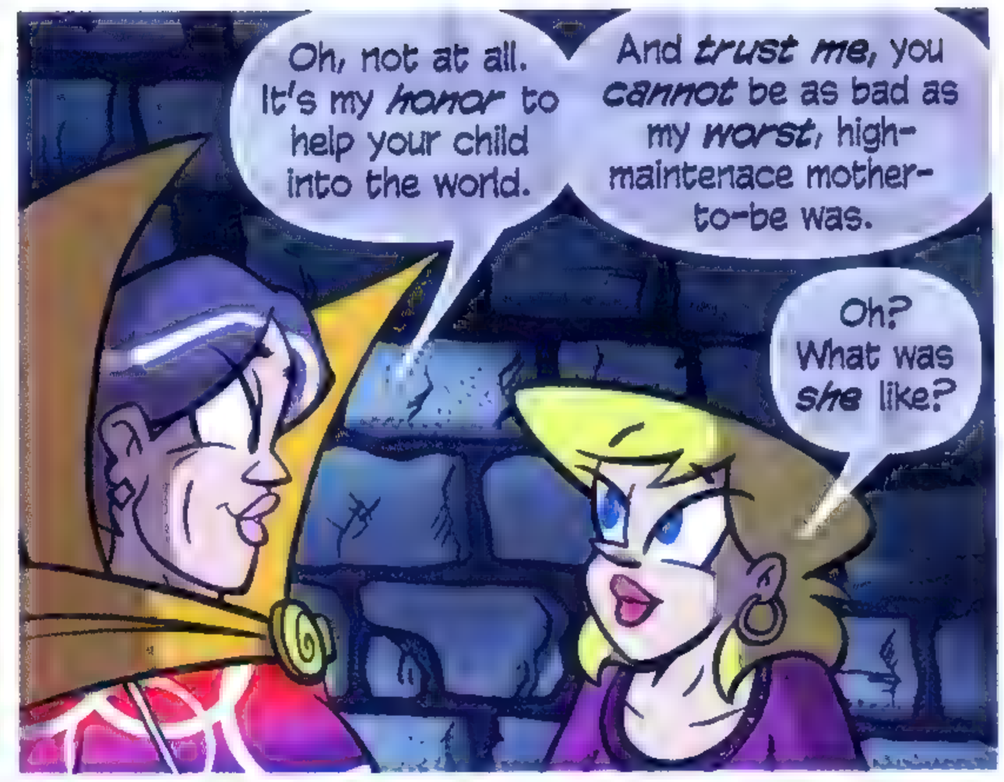

THEN...
Abby, with yon spell in place, both *mortal* and *magical* methods find you and baby to be doing *wonderfully*.
So, that's it?

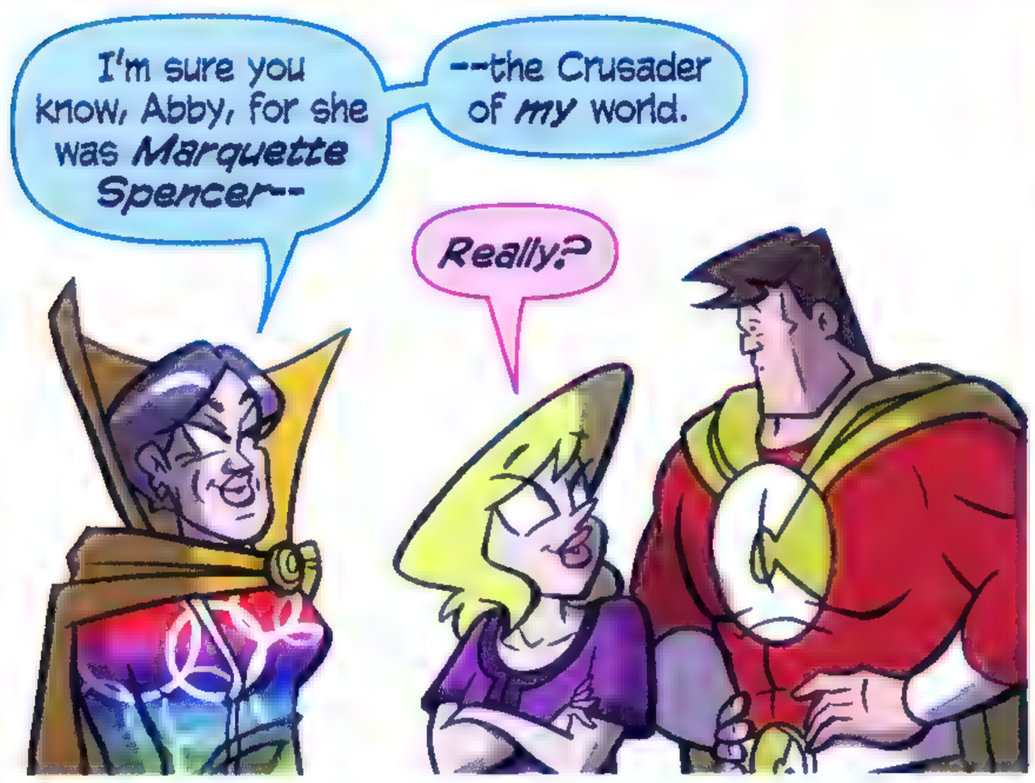

We *could* return to my counterpart's office and perform an *ultrasound* if you'd like, but I see no need for it.
Moreover, at this early stage the baby's heartbeat is *virtually imperceptible*.
Sniff!

Mark, are you *crying*?
What? No, I--

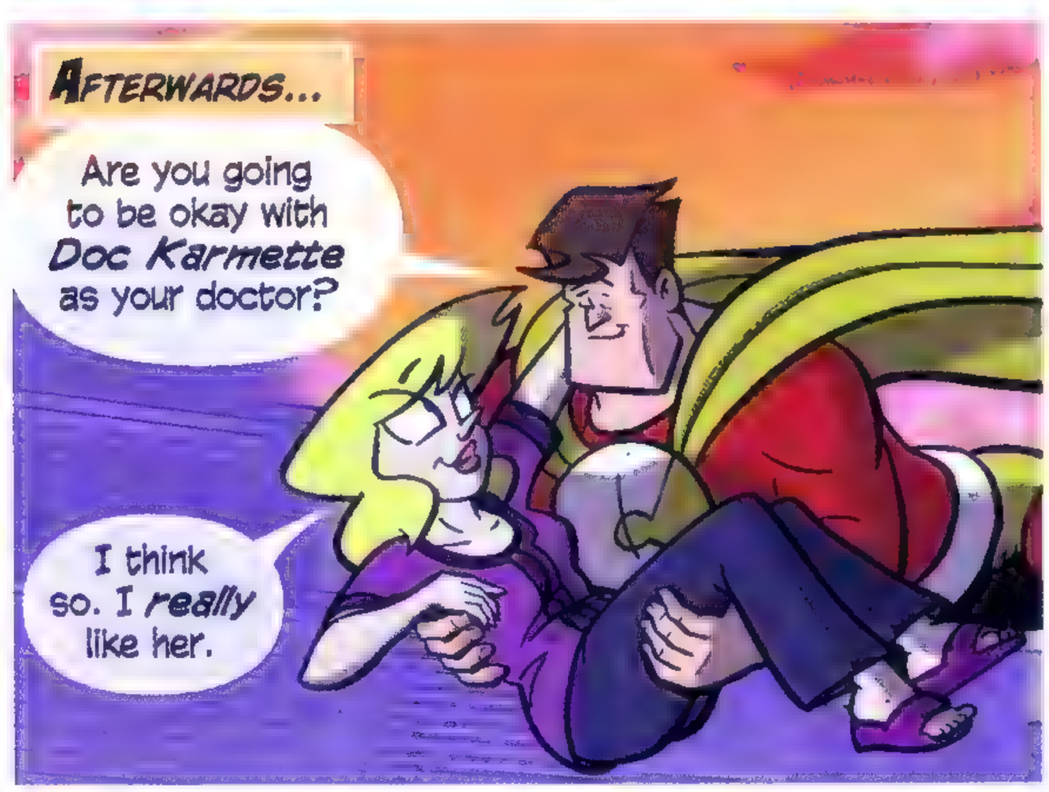
You can hear the *heartbeat*, can't you?
Well, maybe just a *little*.

I'd like to see you *next month*, Abby. Schedule it with my counterpart, and I'll arrange to be here.
I hope I'm not being too much *trouble* for you, Doctor.


Oh, not at all. It's my *honor* to help your child into the world.
And *trust me*, you *cannot* be as bad as my *worst*, high-maintenace mother-to-be was.
Oh? What was *she* like?


I'm sure you know, Abby, for she was *Marquette Spencer*--
--the Crusader of *my* world.
Really?

Um, is there any way we could *not* tell Paul about this?
Doubtful. I've *already* mentally contacted him.


AFTERWARDS...
Are you going to be okay with *Doc Karmette* as your doctor?
I think so. I *really* like her.

She's *exactly* the kind of doctor I was hoping to find.
And, knowing she can handle all the *special* aspects of our pregnancy does put my mind *at ease*.

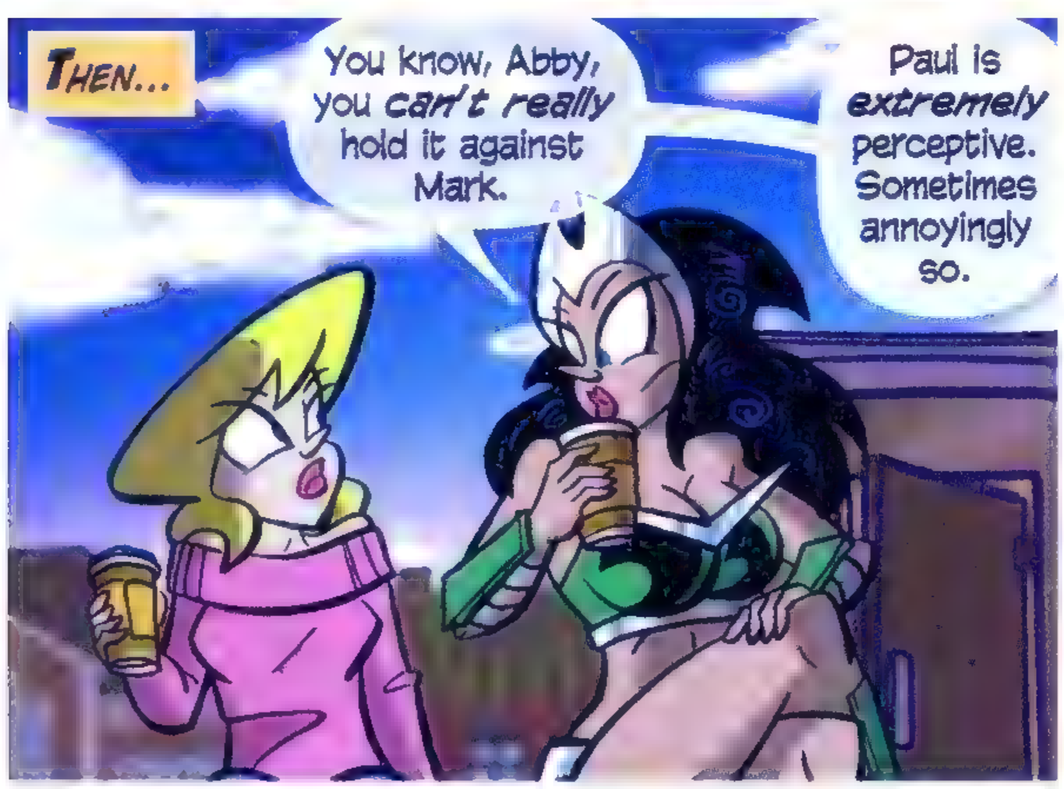
You know, *colleges* are--
Sigh.

THE NEXT DAY...
Hello, Abby!
Oh, hey Amazonia.

You know, I don't know that I'm in the mood for tea, today--
Oh, um, neither was I. I brought hot chocolate instead.

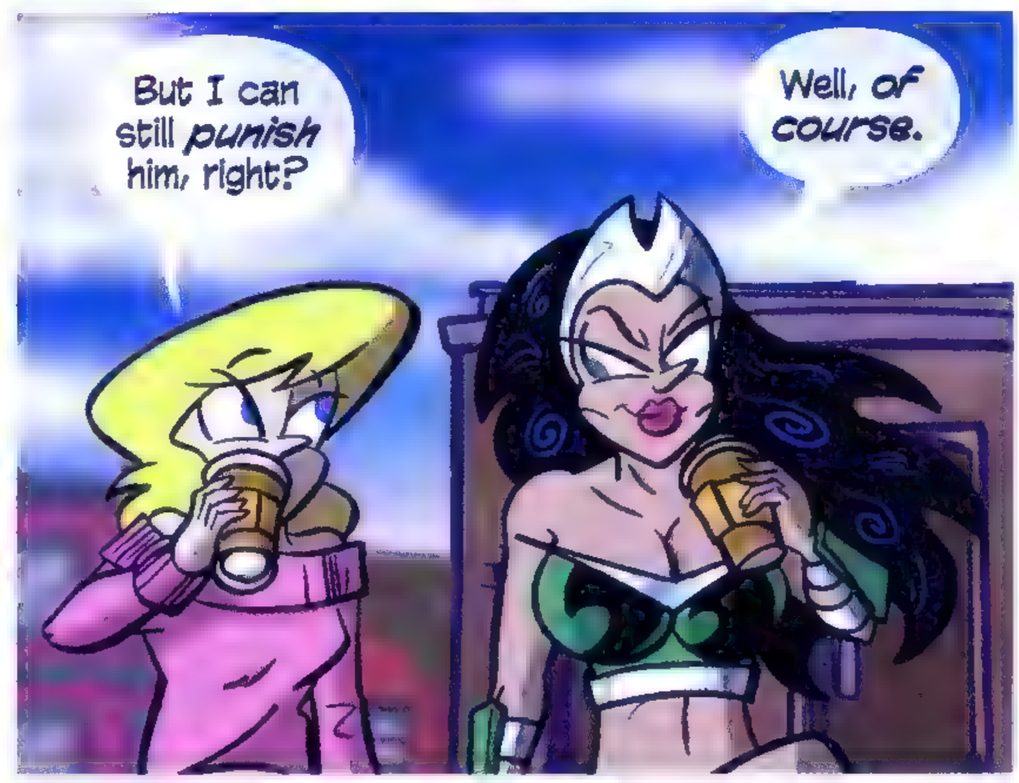
You did?

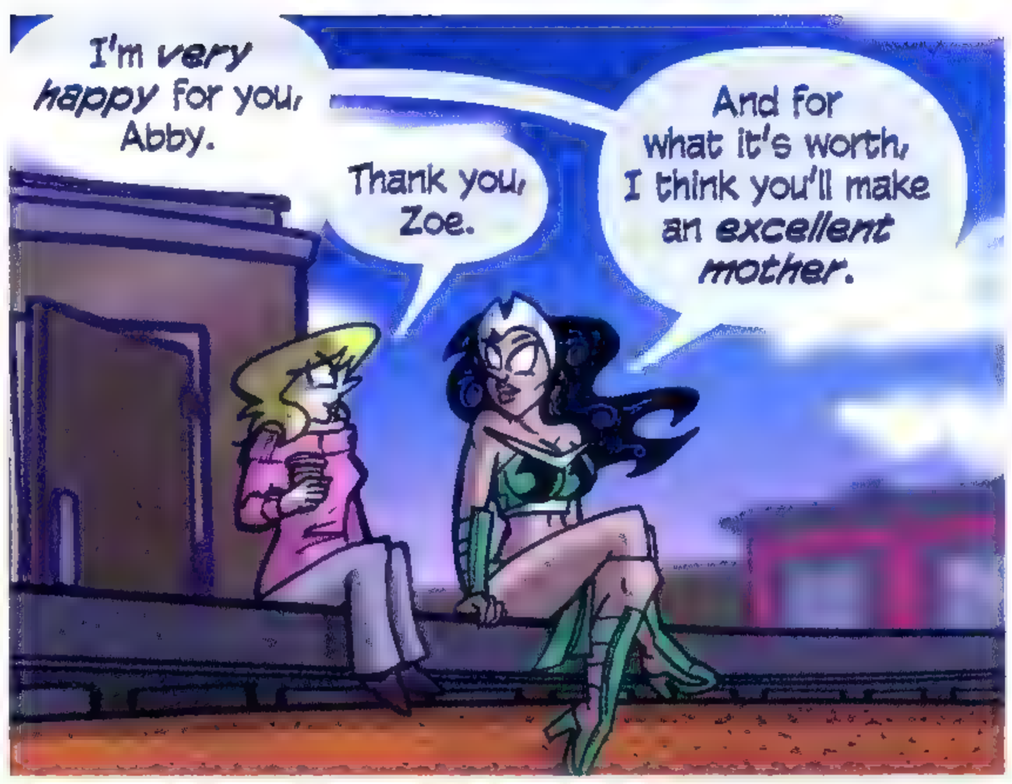
So he told Paul, did he?
Uh-oh.


THEN...
You know, Abby, you can't really hold it against Mark.
Paul is extremely perceptive. Sometimes annoyingly so.

And Paul told you?
Sure. You'd expect Mark to tell you if the situations were reversed, right?

Point taken.
Besides, with Doc Karma giving us the "all clear", I was thinking we could start telling people anyway.


But I can still punish him, right?
Well, of course.


I'm *very happy* for you, Abby.
Thank you, Zoe.
And for what it's worth, I think you'll make an *excellent mother*.

You do?
Oh, *definitely*. You're a warm, caring soul, and you'll be a *nuturing influence* on your child.

You won't *belittle* her... or withhold your *affection*...
...or be nothing but *hypercritical* about *every* decision she makes.

Time to go visit your mother for this year's *Festival of Warmth?*
The *ironically named* Festival of Warmth.

So, how is Mark handling his *impending fatherhood?*
He seems *fine*. Why do you ask?

Well, some of us in our line of work have an *overdeveloped sense* of *responsibility*.
I could see him *stressing out* just a little bit, maybe doing that *pacing* thing he does.

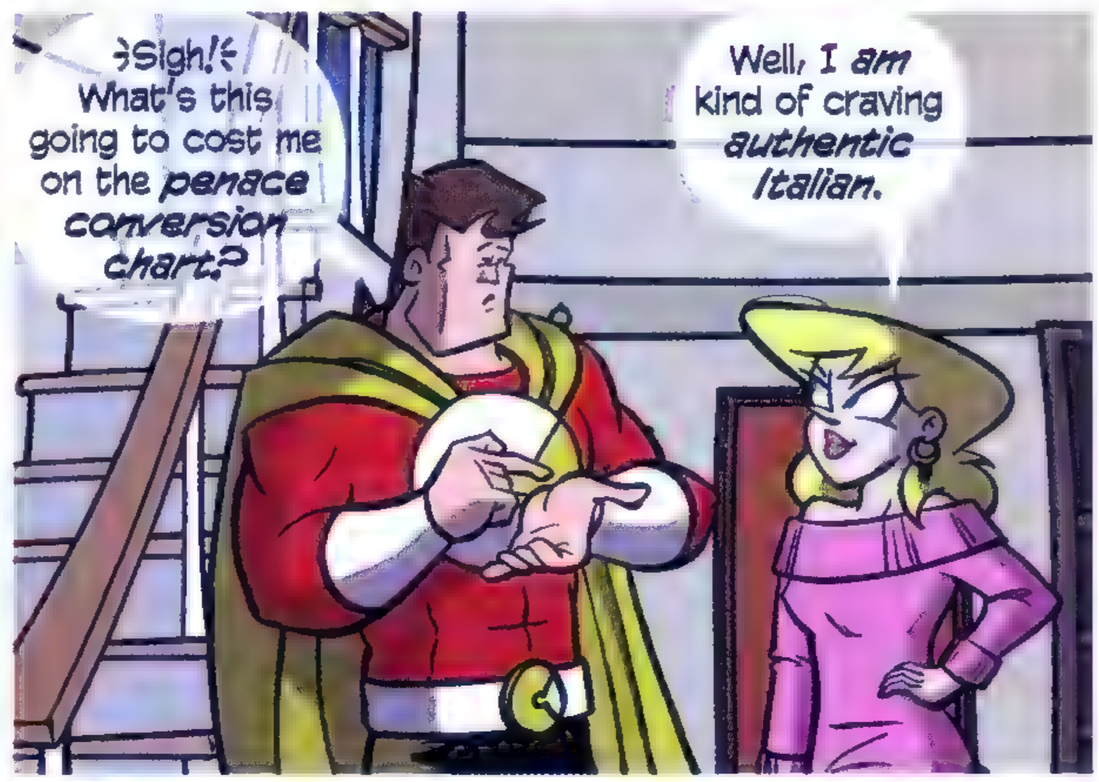
Nope, I haven't caught him doing that.
Well--

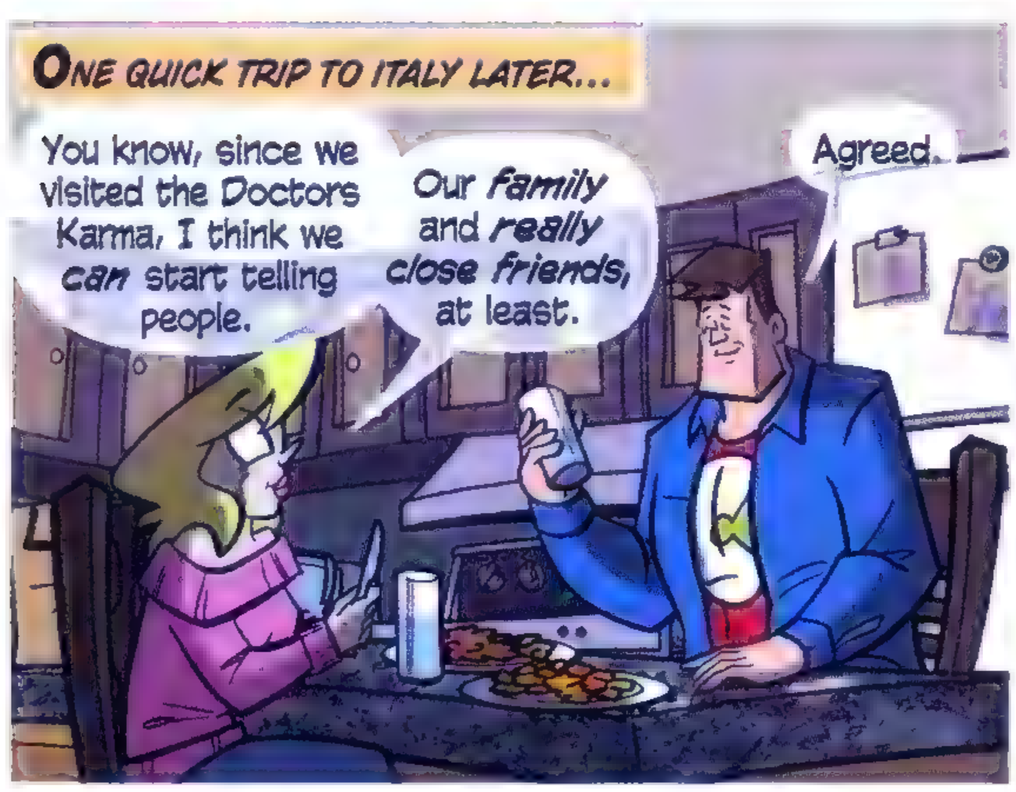
--*you might not see it.*

THEN...
Hi, honey.
Hello, Mark.
Hey, I've got a question for you.

You waited six months to tell me your secret--
--so why did it take you less than six hours to tell Paul our secret?

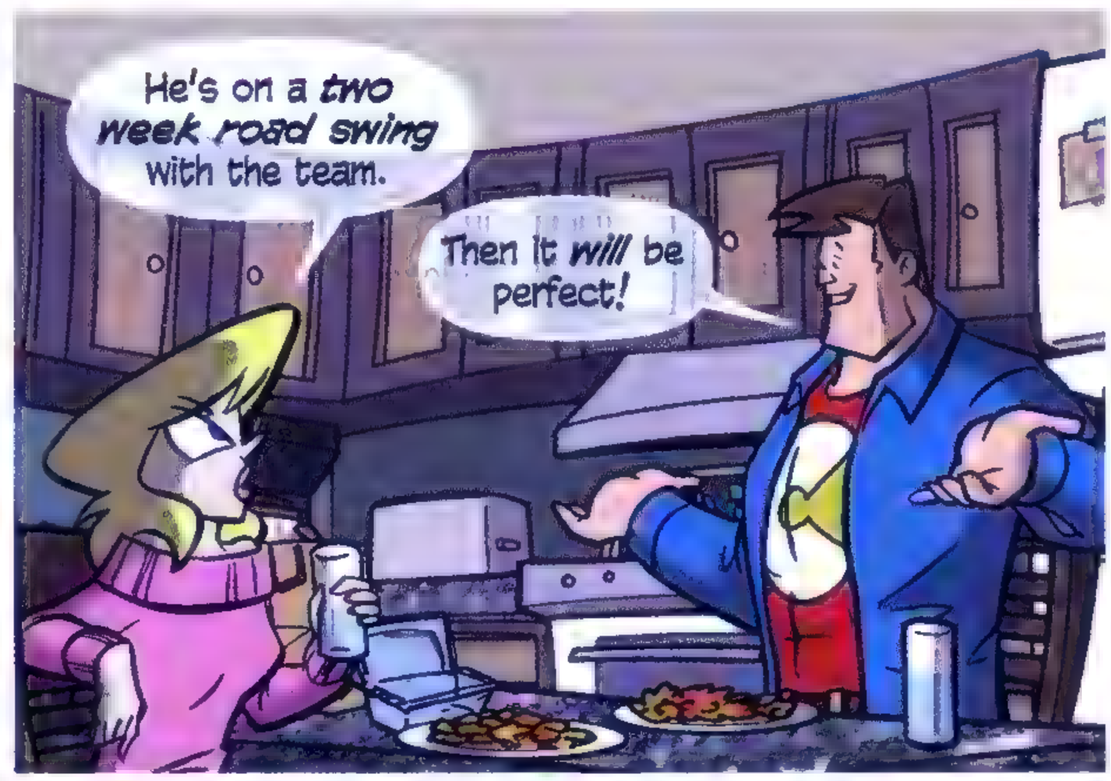
How did you--oh, Zoe, right.
I didn't tell him. He's Paul, you know how... he just figured...

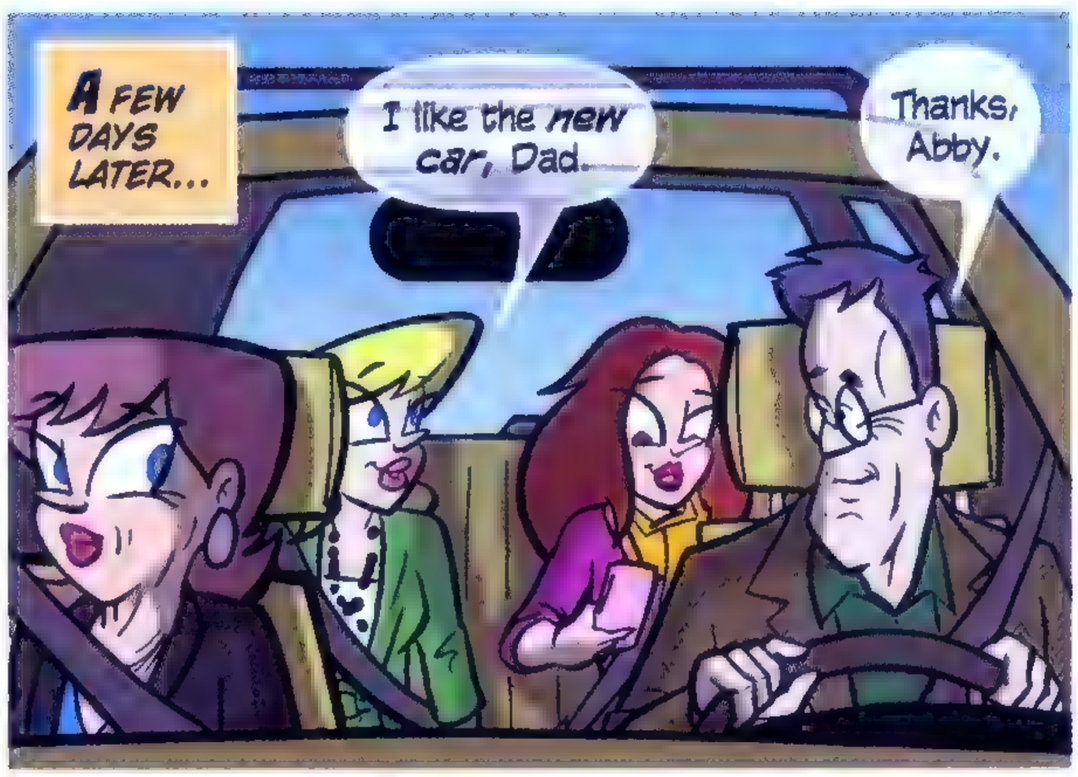

÷Sigh!÷ What's this going to cost me on the penace conversion chart?
Well, I am kind of craving authentic Italian.

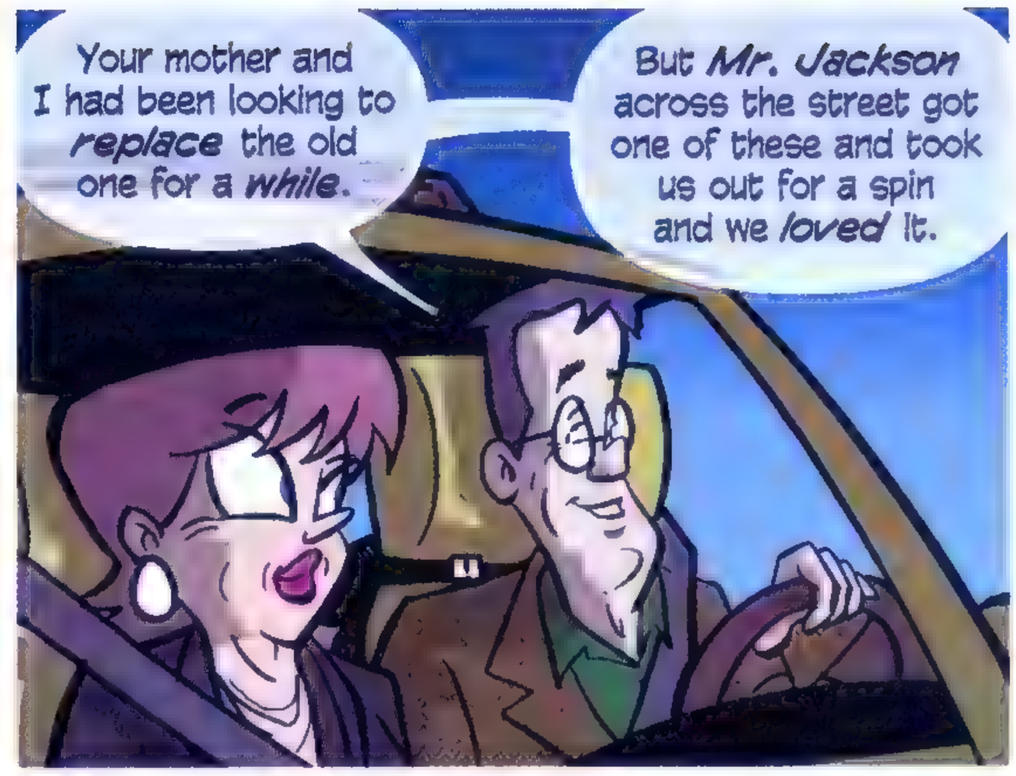

ONE QUICK TRIP TO ITALY LATER...
You know, since we visited the Doctors Karma, I think we can start telling people.
Our family and really close friends, at least.
Agreed.

And I was thinking, my parents have been wanting to visit your parents in Ohio for a while.
So, assuming schedules work out, maybe we could get everyone together this weekend.

It'd be the perfect opportunity to tell them all.
Um, will your brother be there?

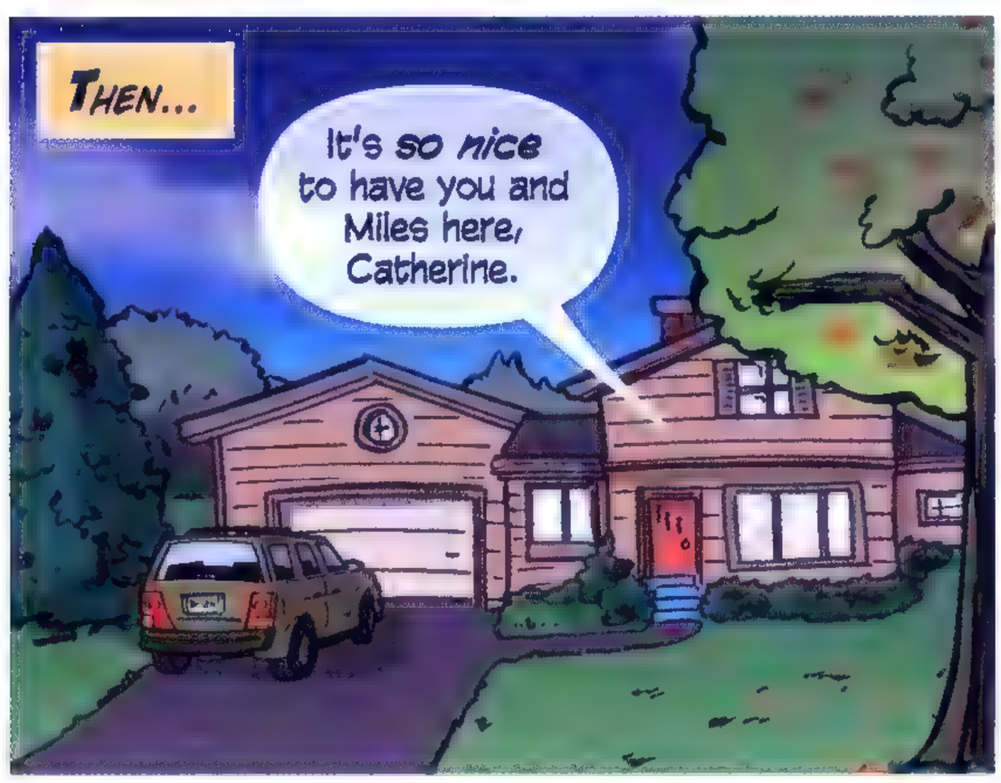

He's on a two week road swing with the team.
Then it will be perfect!


A FEW DAYS LATER...
I like the new car, Dad.
Thanks, Abby.


Your mother and I had been looking to replace the old one for a while.
But Mr. Jackson across the street got one of these and took us out for a spin and we loved it.

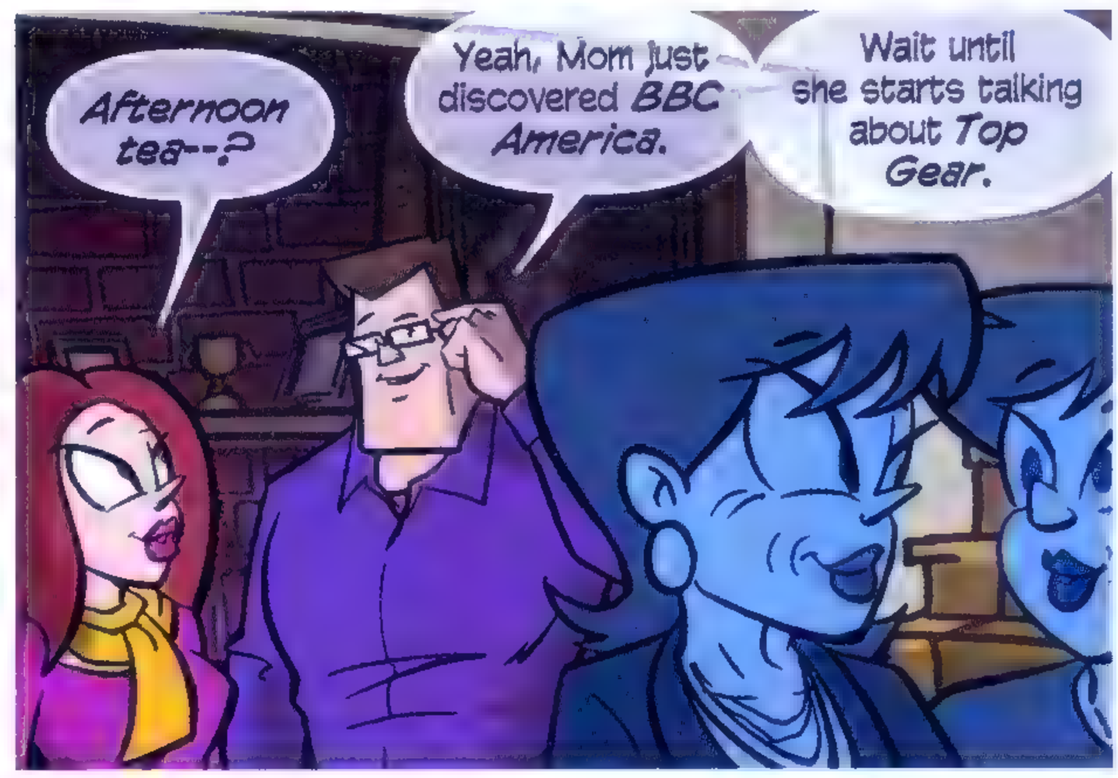
It gets really good mileage, and feel how smooth the ride is.

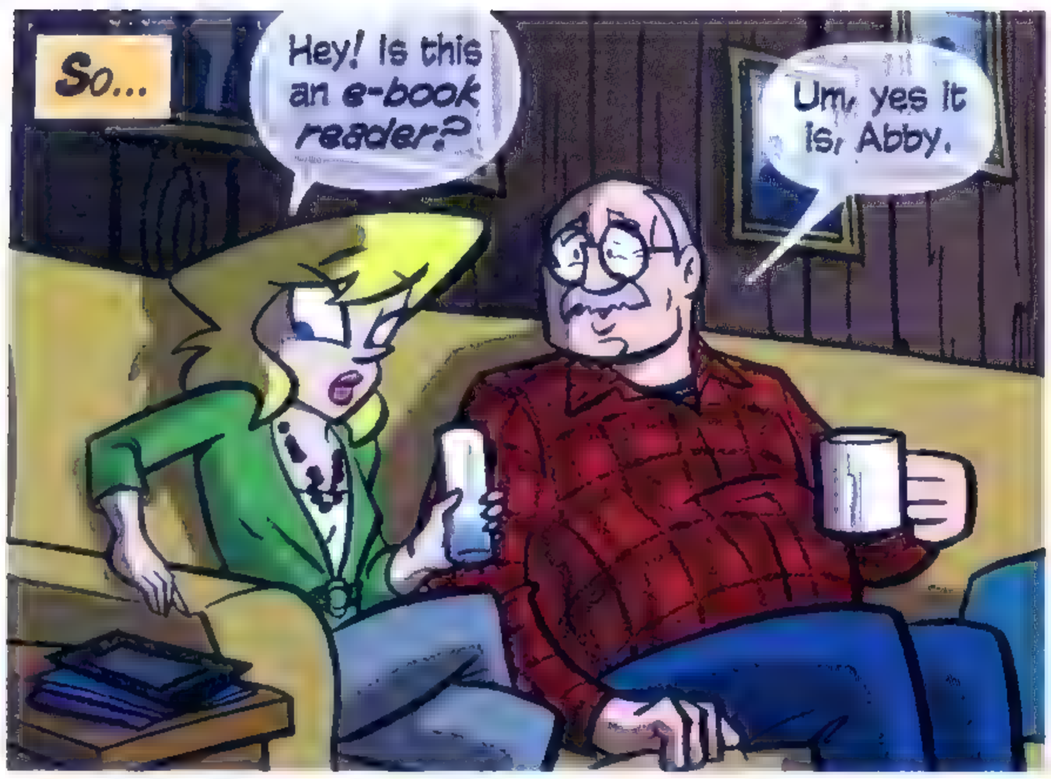
Um, you know that's not all the car, right?


THEN...
It's so nice to have you and Miles here, Catherine.

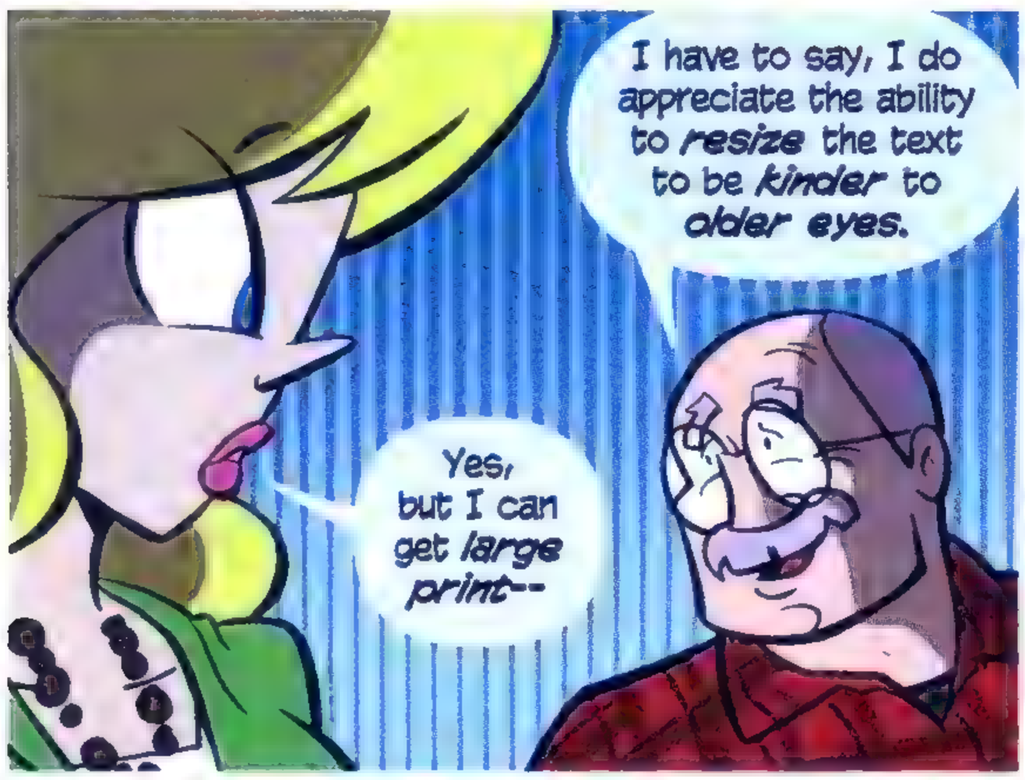
I'm only sorry it took us this long to finally come vist.
You're here now, and that's what's important.

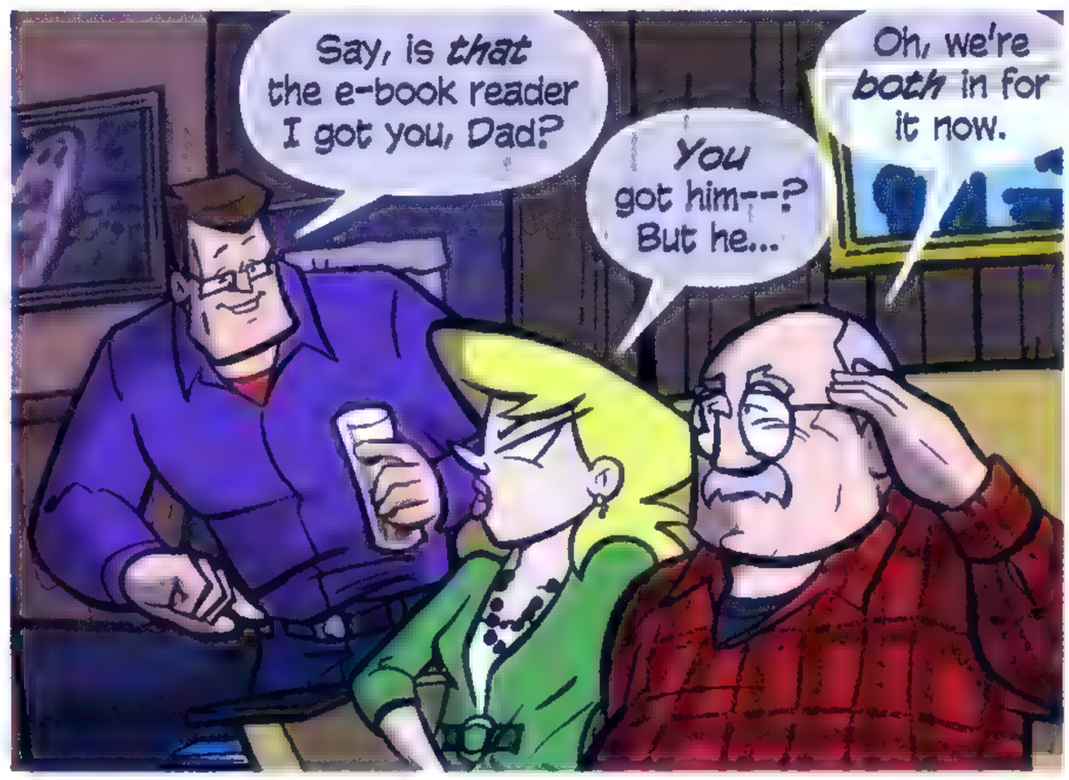
You're right on time, too. I just put out the afternoon tea and biscuits.


Afternoon tea--?
Yeah, Mom just discovered BBC America.
Wait until she starts talking about Top Gear.


So...
Hey! Is this an e-book reader?
Um, yes it is, Abby.

You know I can get you anything you'd like at cost through my store, right?
I do. But a friend of mine lent that to me so I could try it out.


I have to say, I do appreciate the ability to resize the text to be kinder to older eyes.
Yes, but I can get large print--

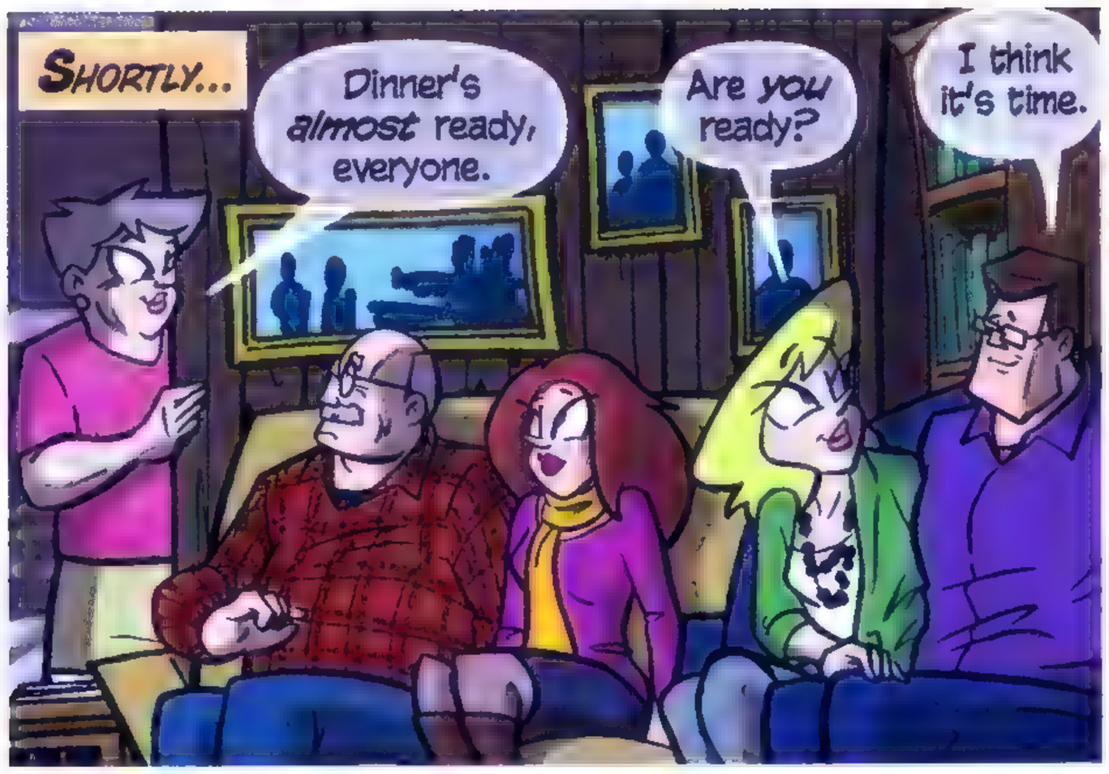

Say, is that the e-book reader I got you, Dad?
You got him--? But he...
Oh, we're both in for it now.

THEN...
Charlotte, your mother said you're working at the art museum now?

Since I got back from college.
In fact, I just found out that they're going to let me curate the new Schreckengost exhibit this winter.
That's great!

Does that mean you've been promoted?
It's more responsibility, but it's still part of the internship program.

So you're still not getting paid then?
Huff!


SHORTLY...
Dinner's almost ready, everyone.
Are you ready?
I think it's time.

Listen up, everyone. We have some news, too.
WE'RE HAVING A BABY!

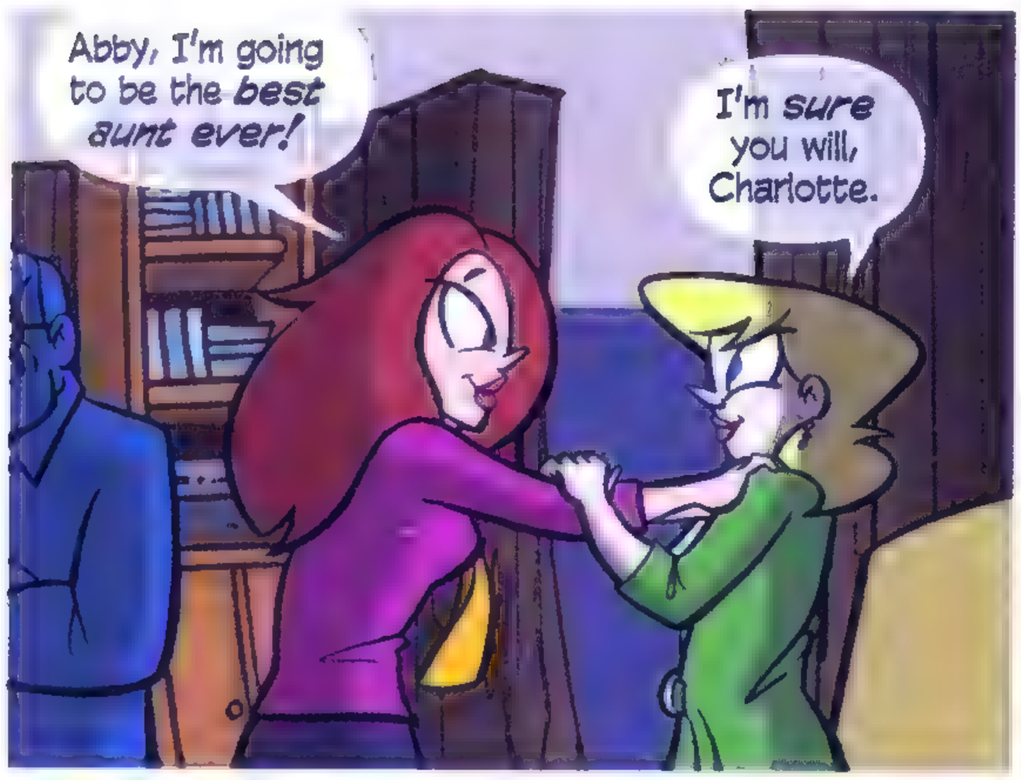
Oh, Abby!
That's wonderful!
Congratulations, son!
Just had to step on my good news, didn't you?

Abby, I'm so, so happy for you!
Thanks, Mom.

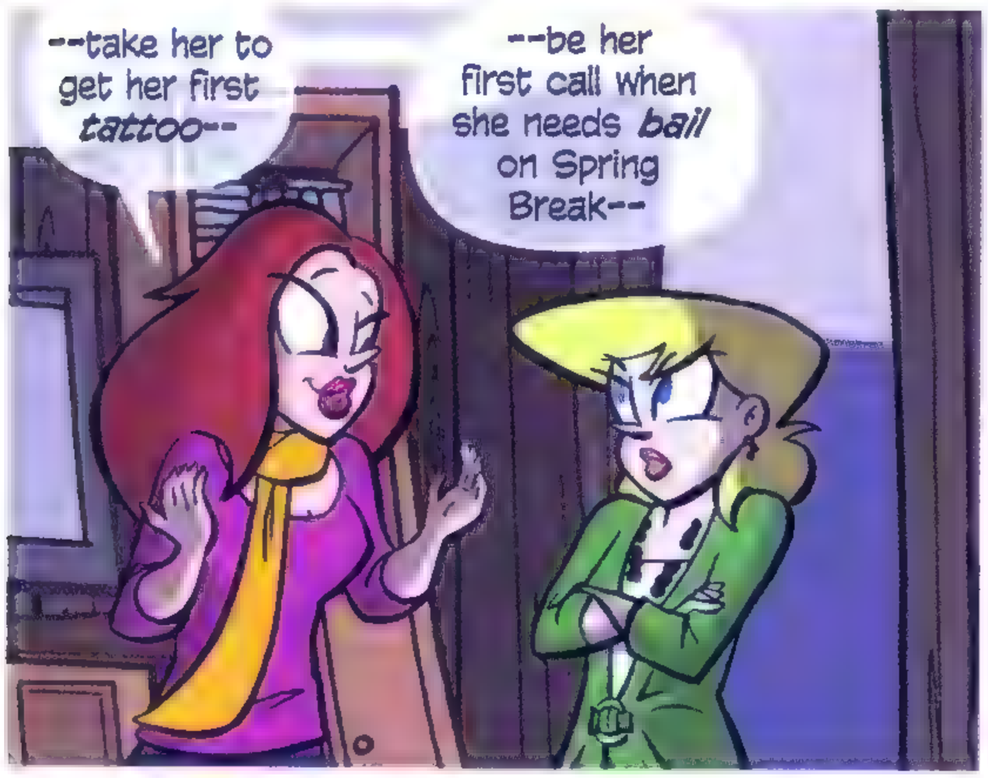
When is the baby due, Mark?
April 22nd.
Right around tax season? That's going to be rough.

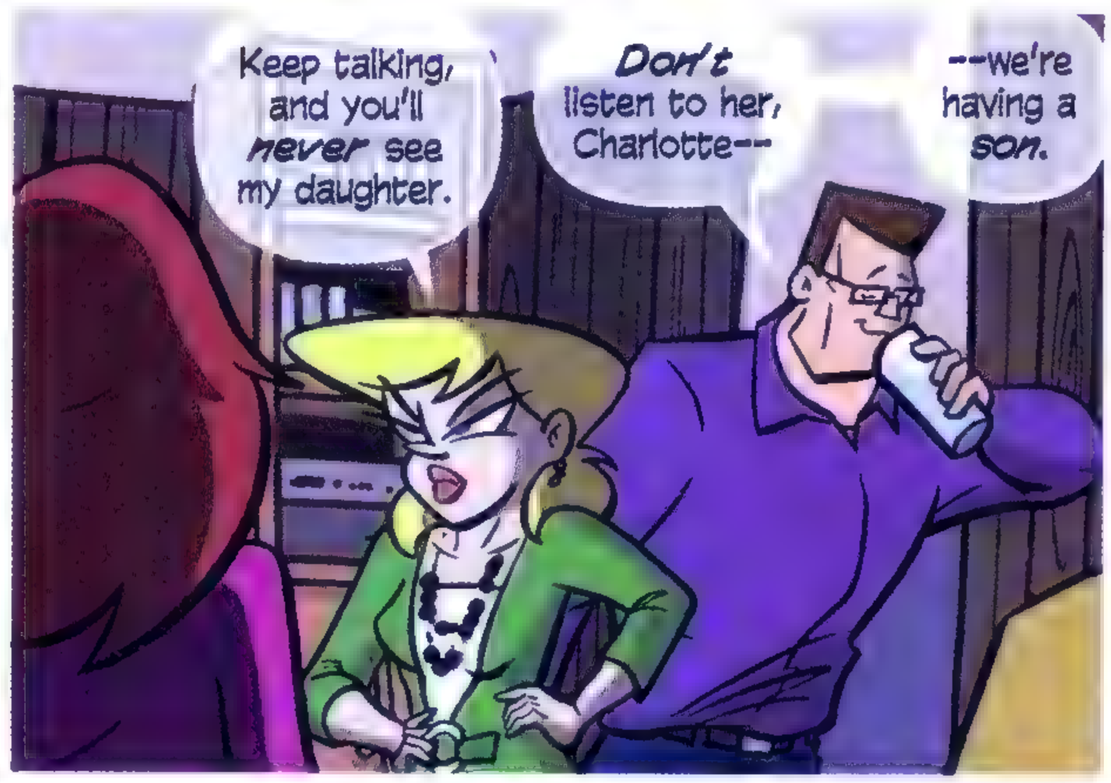
Grandchildren!
Grandchildren!

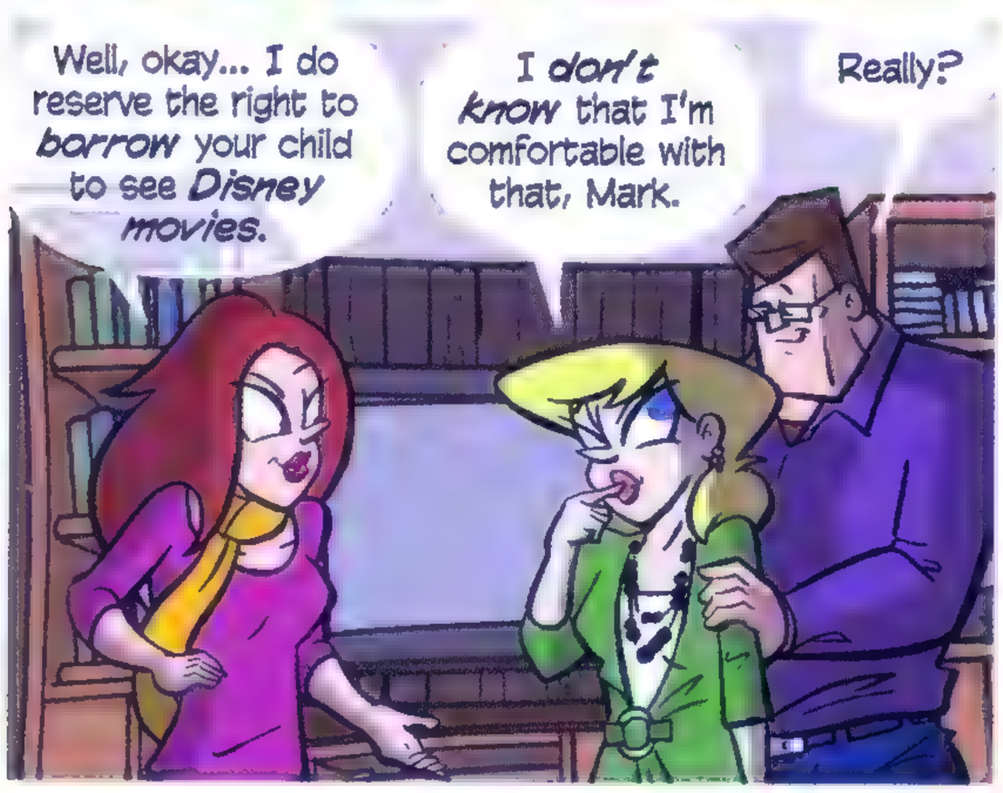
Of course, we're far too young to be grandmothers.
Maybe we can teach them to call us by our first names in public.


Abby, I'm going to be the best aunt ever!
I'm sure you will, Charlotte.

I'll get her whatever Barbie dolls she wants--
--take her to Chuck E. Cheese--
--be the one she calls when you're being unreasonable--


--take her to get her first tattoo--
--be her first call when she needs bail on Spring Break--

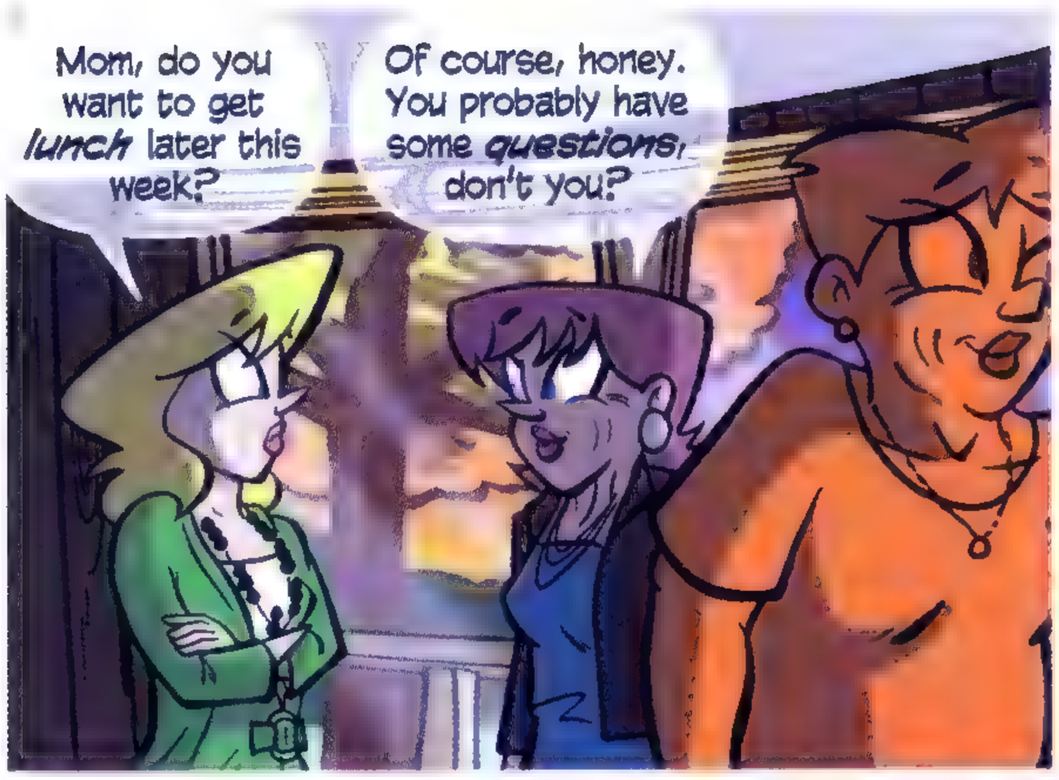

Keep talking, and you'll never see my daughter.
Don't listen to her, Charlotte--
--we're having a son.

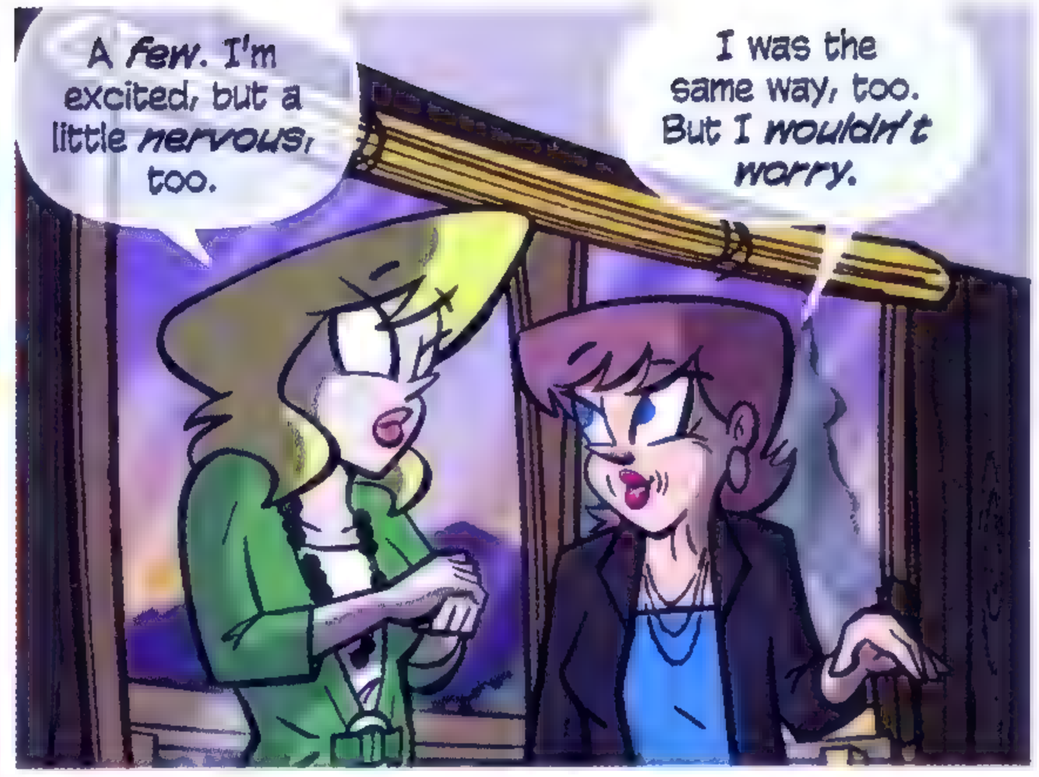

Well, okay... I do reserve the right to borrow your child to see Disney movies.
I don't know that I'm comfortable with that, Mark.
Really?

It just seems like something that's too important for just an aunt to do.
You're right. We're going to have to ask her to be Godmother.

God-mother?

Oh, you guys rock!
Great! Now let's talk about your babysitting schedule...

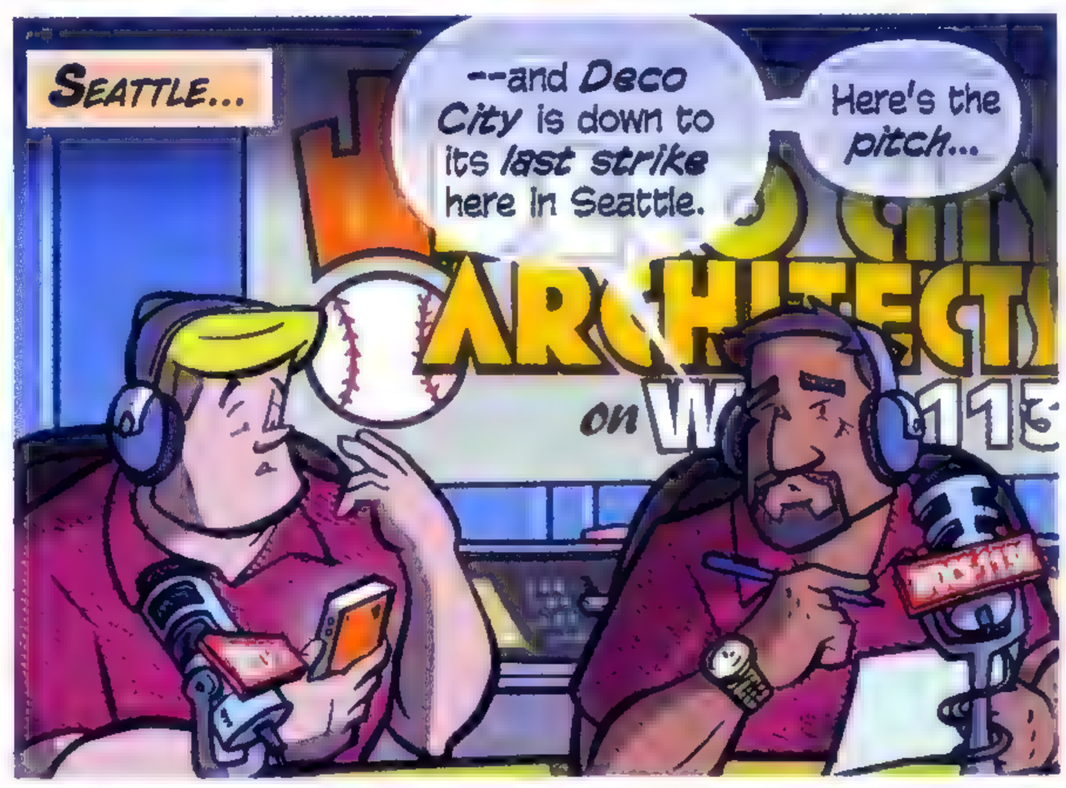

Mom, do you want to get *lunch* later this week?
Of course, honey. You probably have some *questions*, don't you?


A *few*. I'm excited, but a little *nervous*, too.
I was the same way, too. But I *wouldn't worry*.

I wasn't in labor with you for very long *at all*. My doctor called it textbook.
And Charlotte came so quickly we *barely* got settled in the delivery room before she arrived.

What about *Quincy*--?
Well, *that* boy was *trouble* from the *day he was born*.

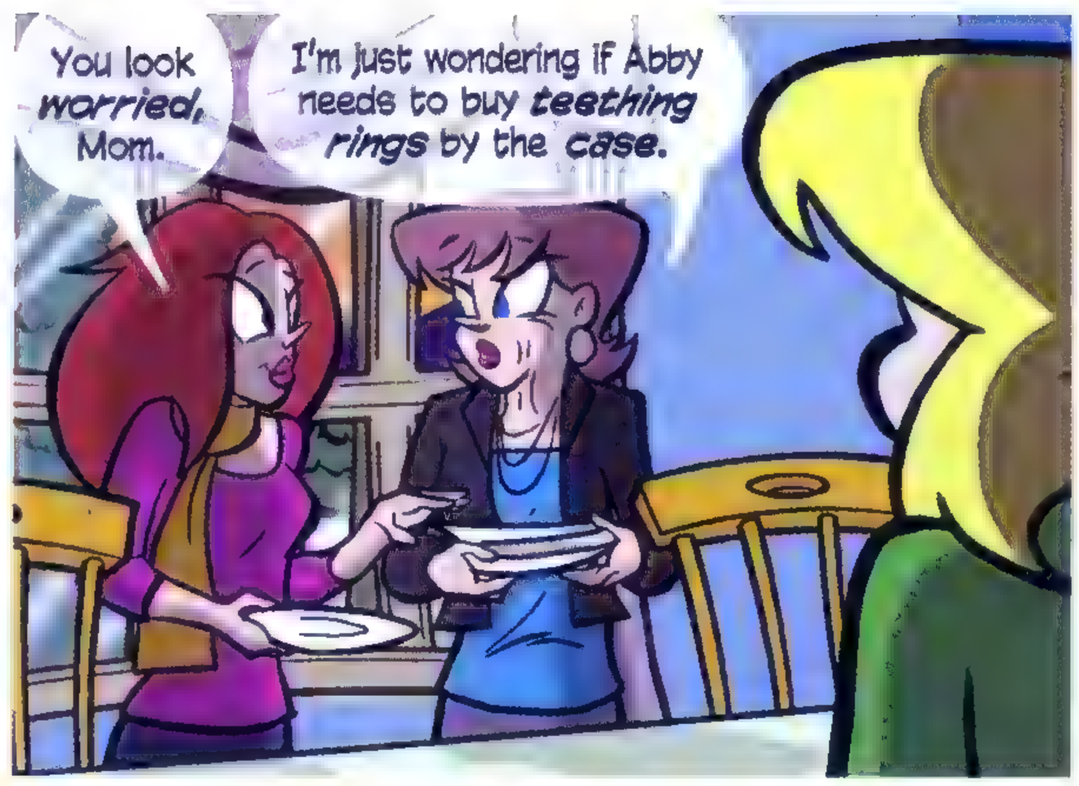
THEN...
You know, we really *should* let Quincy know, too.
Yeah, let's *text him*. The game's probably almost over anyway.


SEATTLE...
--and *Deco City* is down to its *last strike* here in Seattle.
Here's the *pitch*...

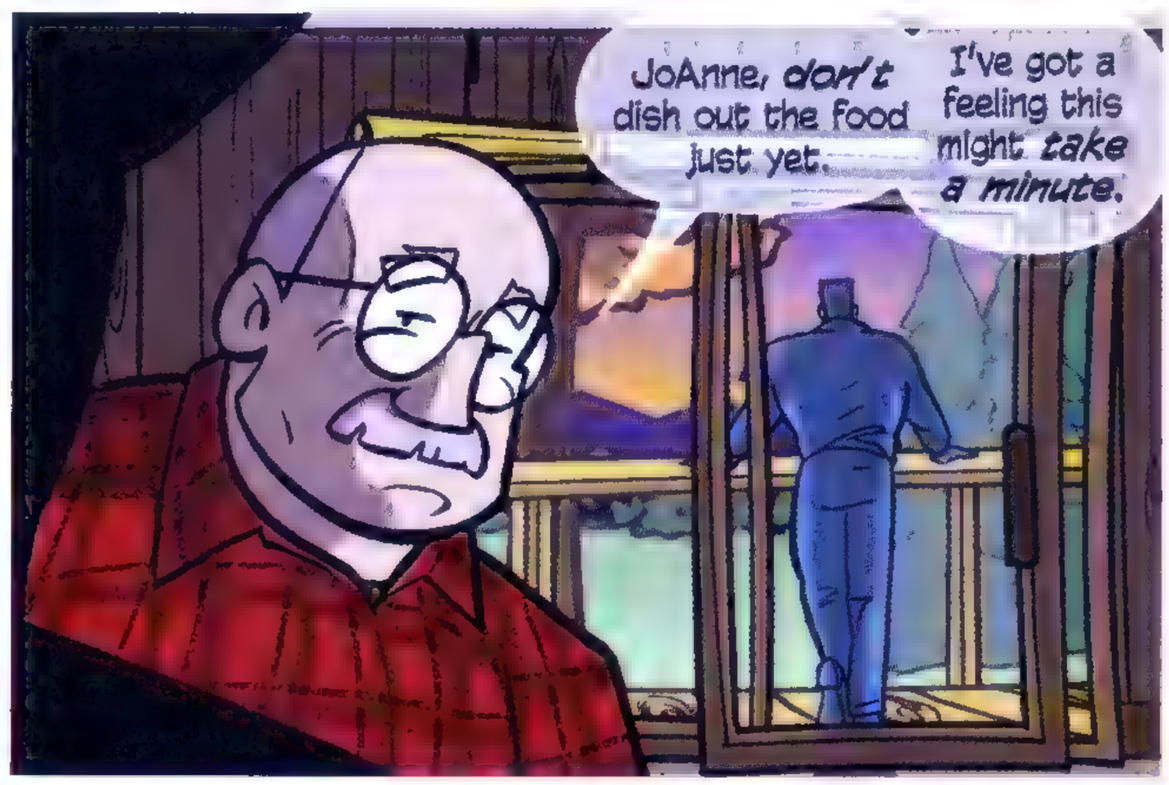
WAA-HOO!

Strike three called.
And with this loss, the Architects are officially *out* of the *pennant race*.

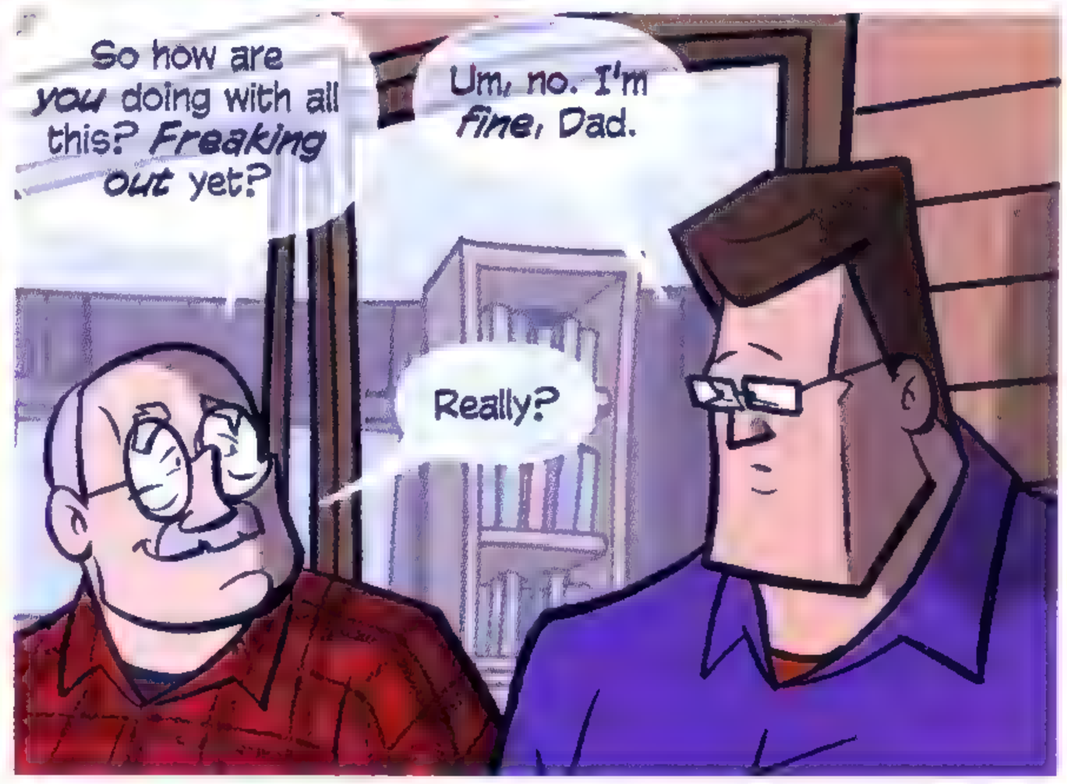
THEN...
So will my niece or nephew have *powers* like his dad?
We're *not sure*, actually. It's *possible*.


You look *worried*, Mom.
I'm just wondering if Abby needs to buy *teething rings* by the *case*.

Did you see where *Mark* went? He didn't get *called away*, did he?
No, I thought I saw him...

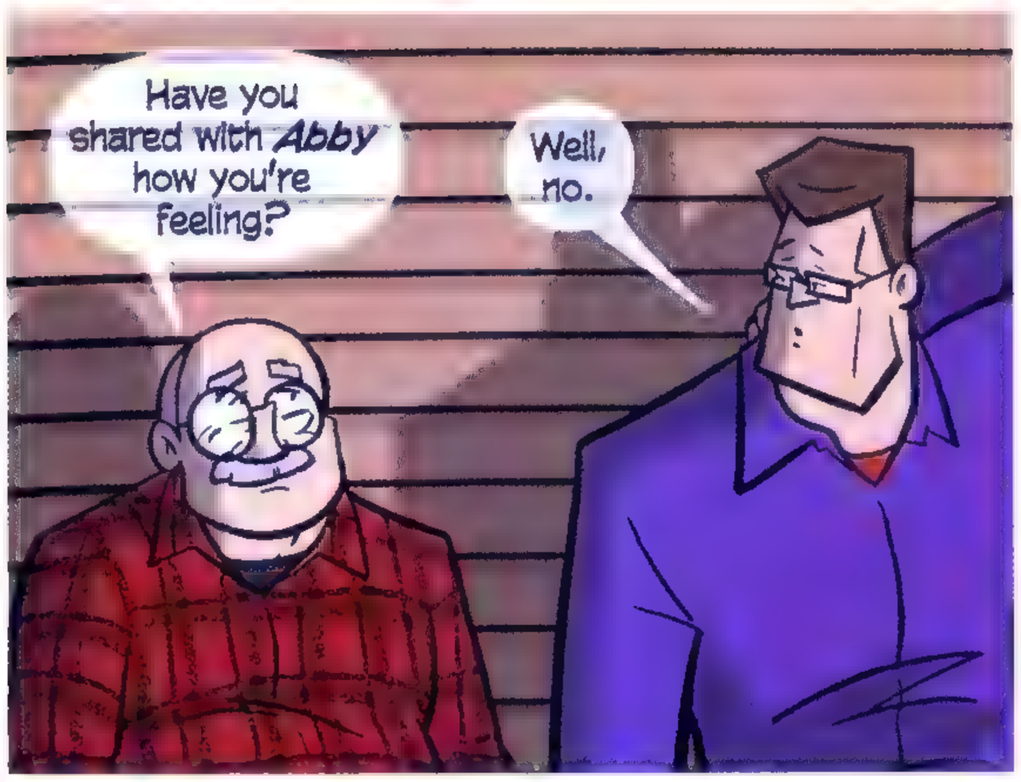

JoAnne, *don't* dish out the food just yet.
I've got a feeling this might *take a minute*.

Hey, son, I *didn't* see you sneak out here.
Hmmm? Oh, yeah, I guess so.

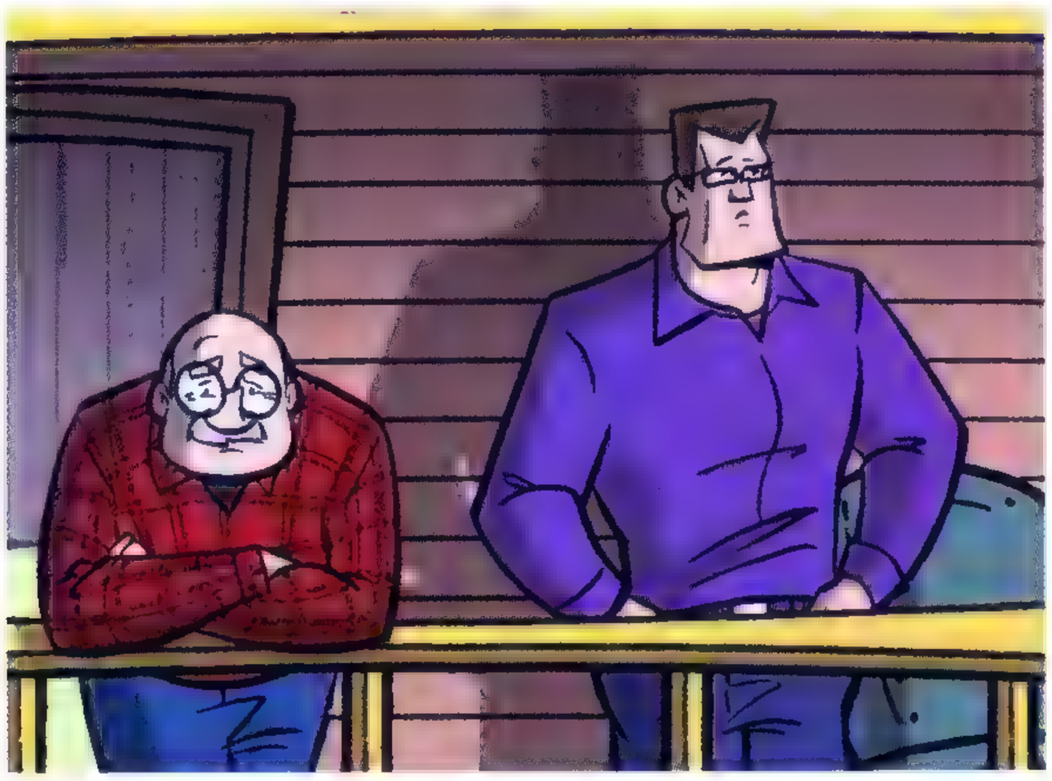

So how are *you* doing with all this? *Freaking out* yet?
Um, no. I'm *fine*, Dad.
Really?

You know, when your mother told me she was pregnant with you, I was *thrilled*. Couldn't have been happier.
Then, one day I was driving to *work*, and I started *worrying* about *college costs* and *broken bones* and *chicken pox* and...
Before I knew it, I was at the *Pennsylvania border*.

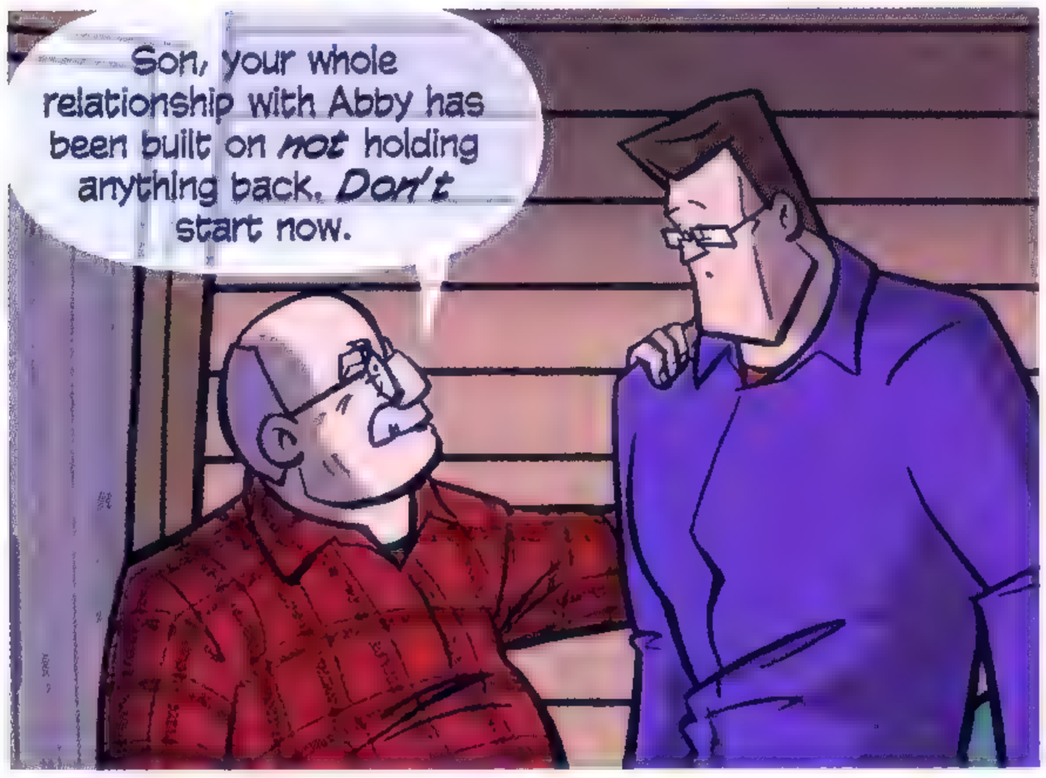
Well, maybe I *am* a little nervous.
I had a *feeling*.

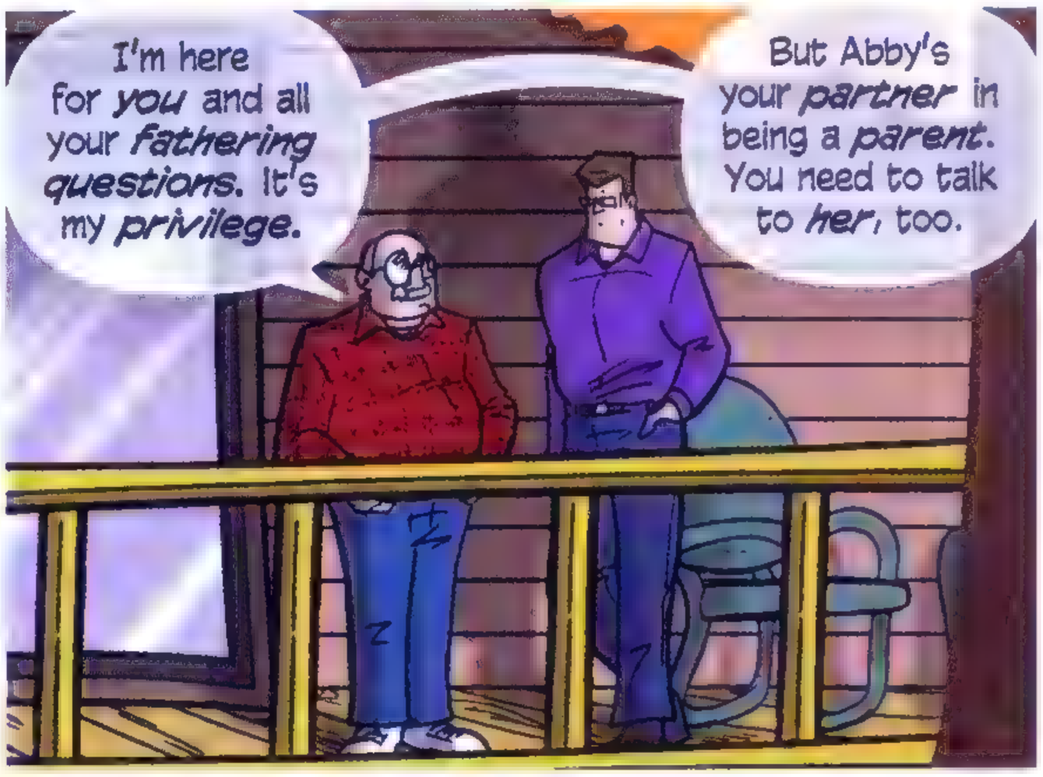

Have you shared with *Abby* how you're feeling?
Well, no.

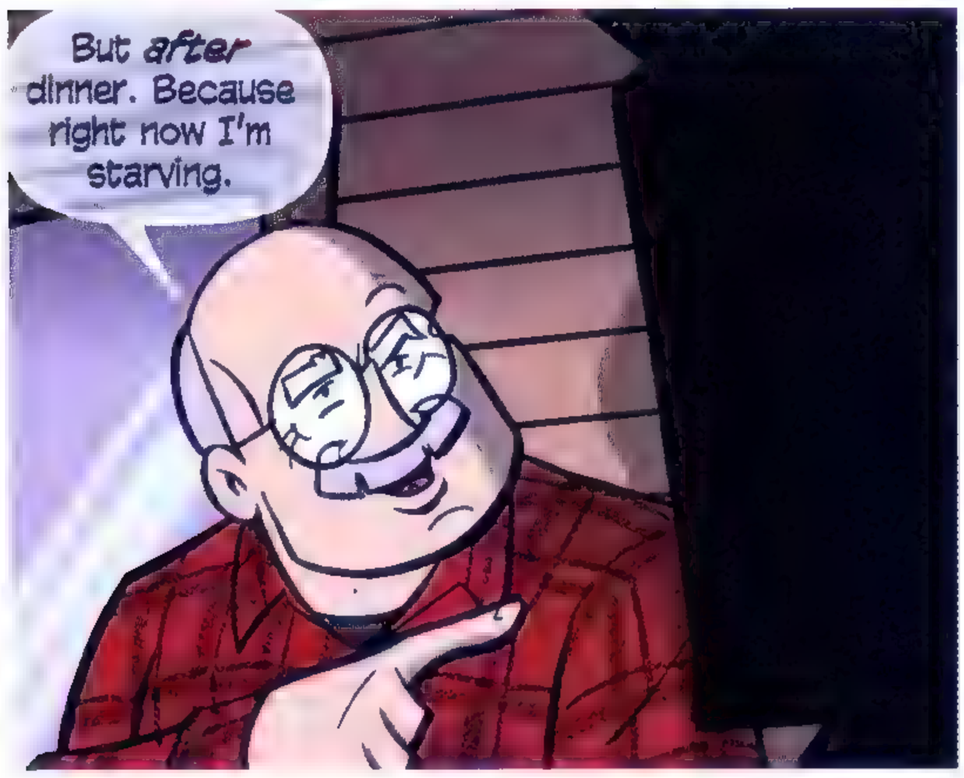
She's going through *so much* right now. I don't want to *burden* her with *my* worries, too.

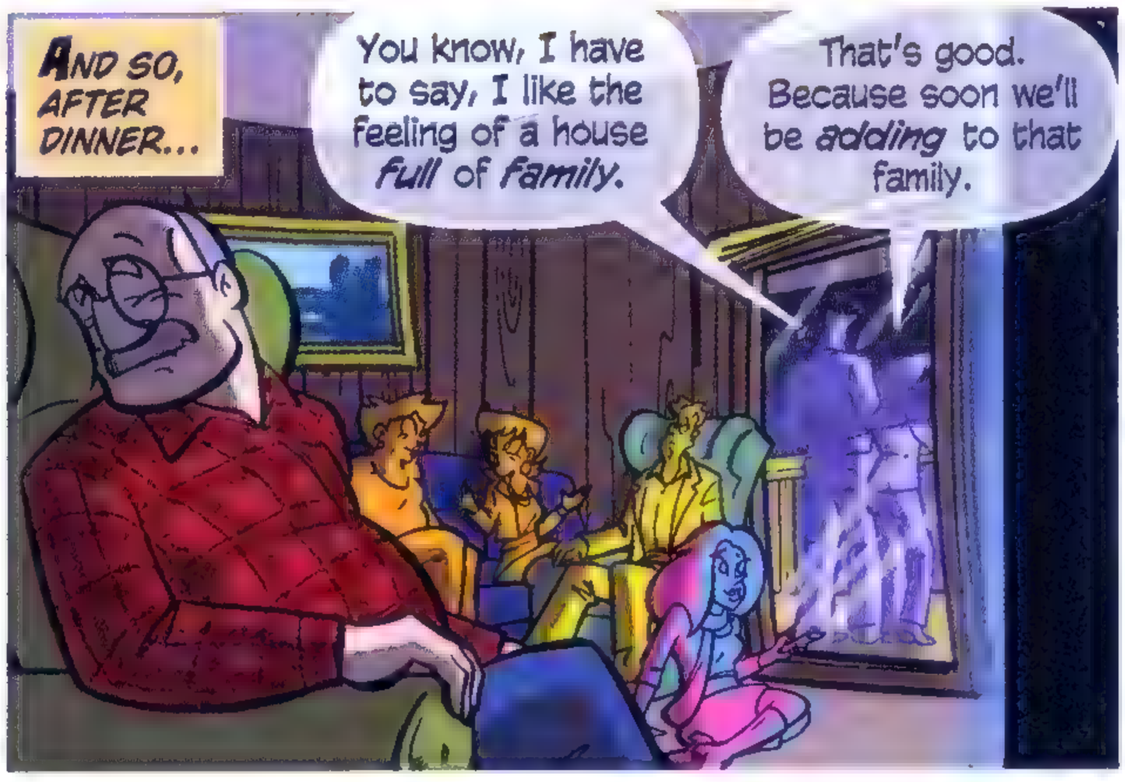


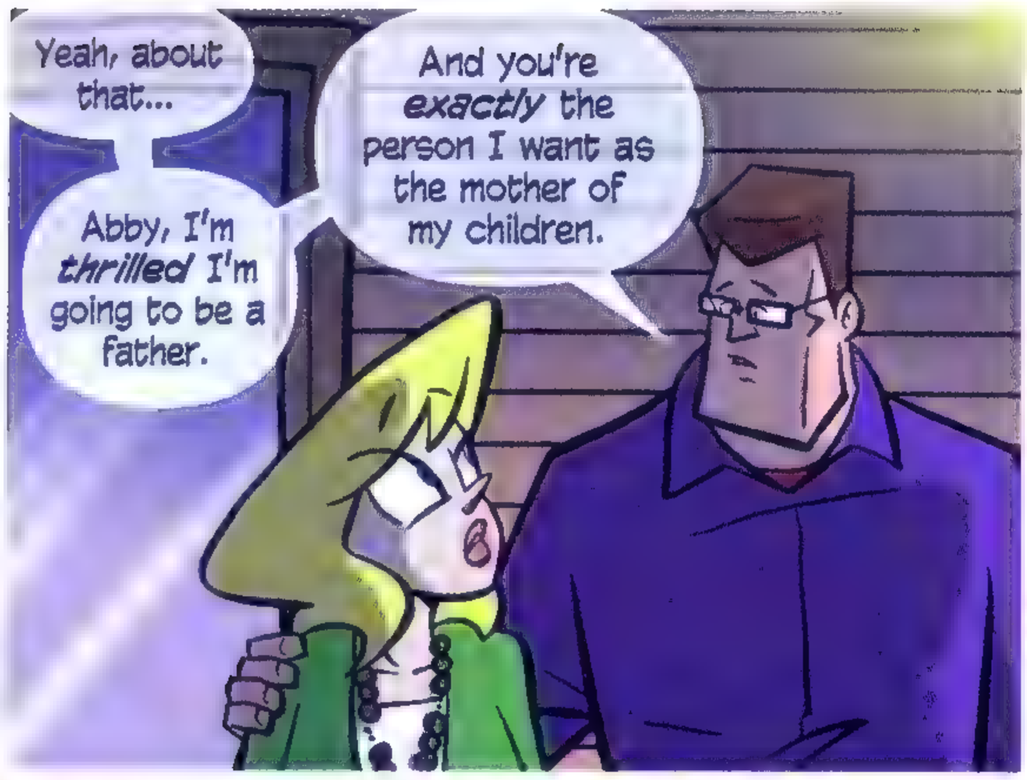
You know you're being an *idiot*, right?


Son, your whole relationship with Abby has been built on *not* holding anything back. *Don't* start now.


I'm here for *you* and all your *fathering questions*. It's my *privilege*.
But Abby's your *partner* in being a *parent*. You need to talk to *her*, too.

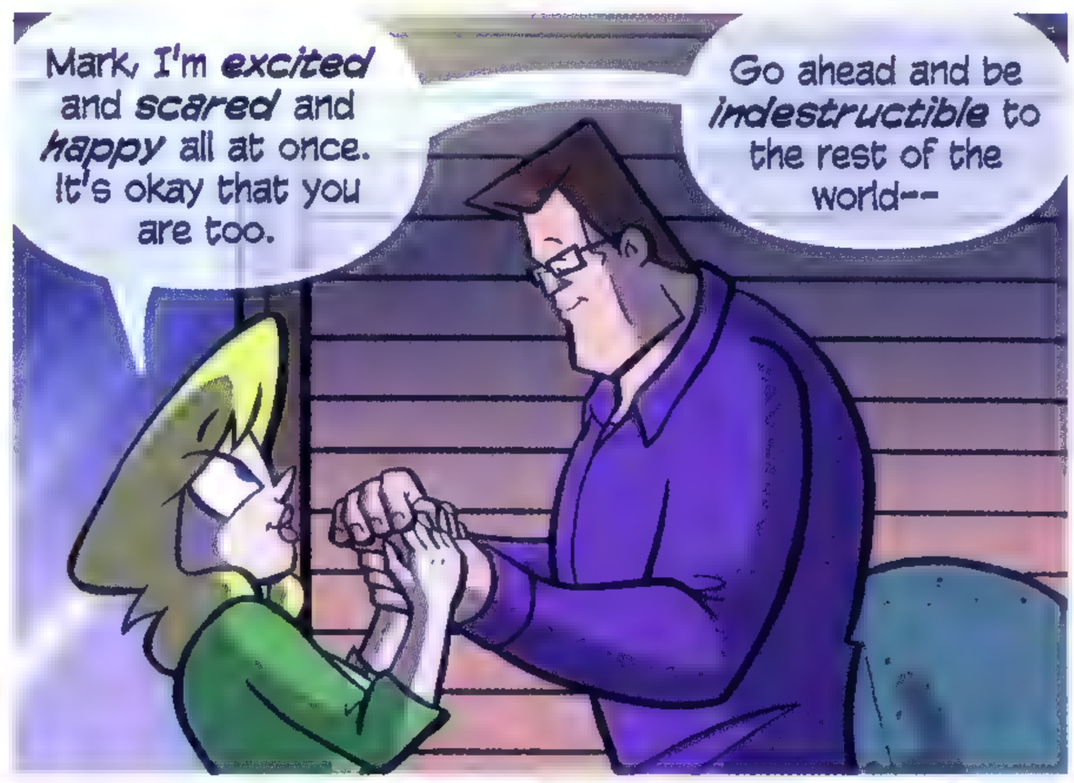

But *after* dinner. Because right now I'm starving.


And so, after dinner...
You know, I have to say, I like the feeling of a house *full* of *family*.
That's good. Because soon we'll be *adding* to that family.


Yeah, about that...
Abby, I'm *thrilled* I'm going to be a father.
And you're *exactly* the person I want as the mother of my children.

But, I'm also *freaking out* just a *little*. As much as I wanted this, it's now very *real*.
I haven't said anything before because I've been trying to be *strong* for you--

Well, *of course* you have. Being *strong* is what you do.


Mark, I'm *excited* and *scared* and *happy* all at once. It's okay that you are too.
Go ahead and be *indestructible* to the rest of the world--

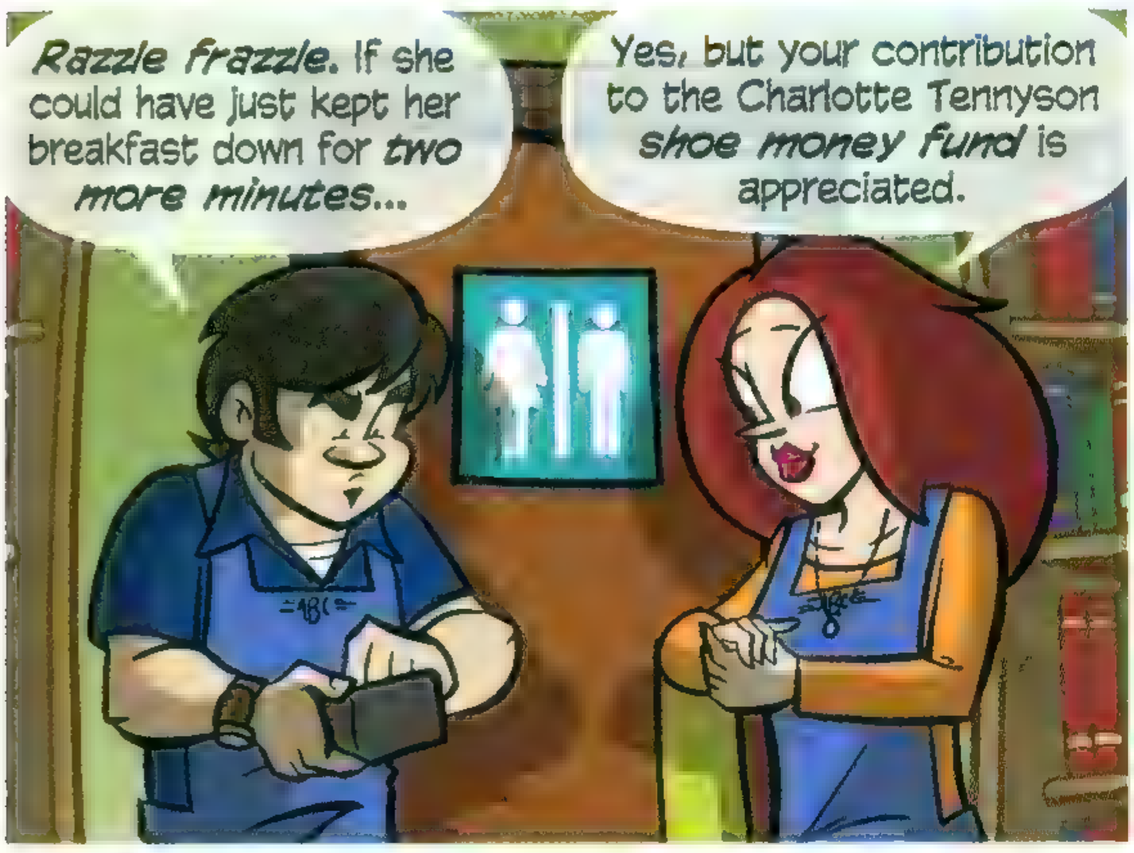
--but you can always be *vulnerable* with me.
34 WEEKS TO GO...

CHAPTER 2
SERIOUSLY?

Oh my goodness! You found it, Abby, you actually found it!
It took a lot of legwork--
--and a little bit of help from a super assistant--
--but yes, we found it in Saskatchewan.
My grandfather wrote that book in 1941, but my family has never seen a copy. Thank you so much.
Time's running out, Charlotte.
I'm not worried, Jason of the six-day losing streak.
Arthurian Legends

10:56. Three minutes.
My sister won't let me down.

GANGWAY!
Pregnant lady coming through!


Razzle frazzle. If she could have just kept her breakfast down for two more minutes...
Yes, but your contribution to the Charlotte Tennyson shoe money fund is appreciated.

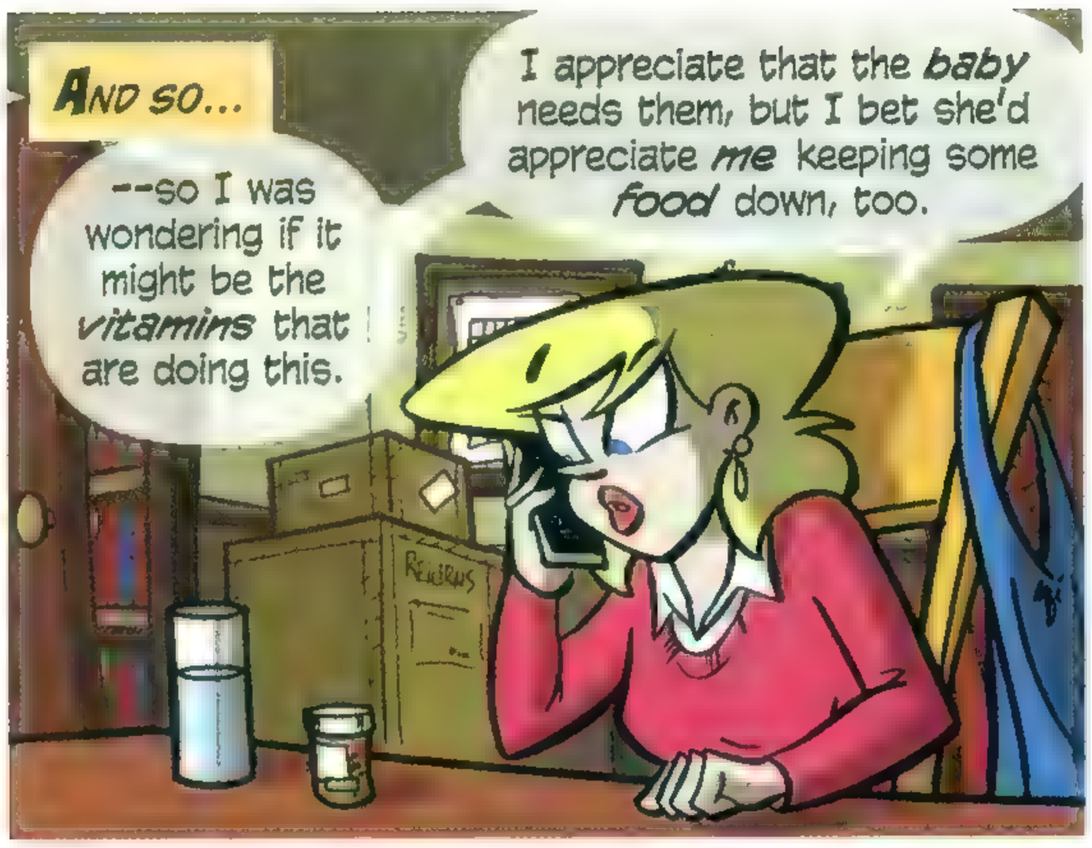
You two are BETTING on my morning sickness?
What, you want a cut?

THEN...
How are you feeling?
A little better. But this competitive morning vomiting thing is getting old.
Cheer up. You've only got seven months left at most.

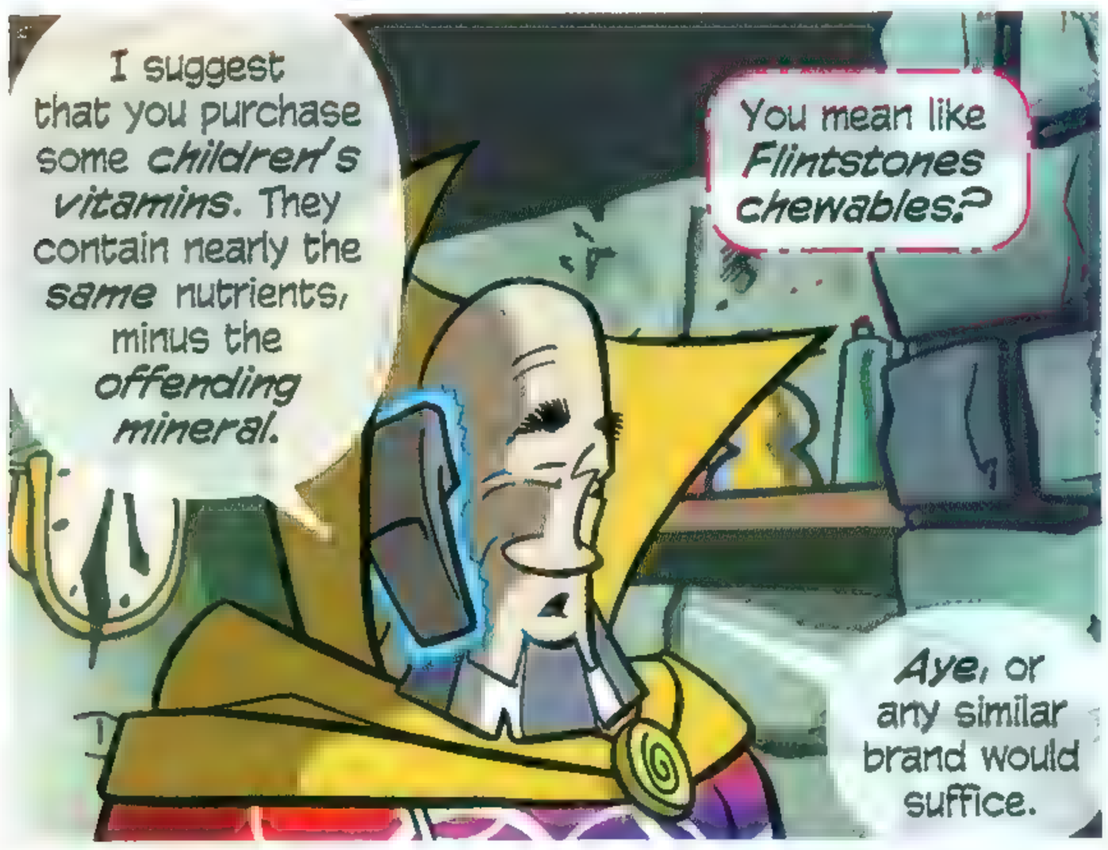
You know, I'm not even sure this really is morning sickness anymore.

It got a lot worse when the Doctors Karma put me on those new prenatal vitamins.
So, you think that's what's making you sick?

Well, that and finding out my employees are placing bets on my suffering.
I think maybe I'm paying you too much.
Really? I think if you were paying me enough I wouldn't need to supplement my income with illicit gambling.

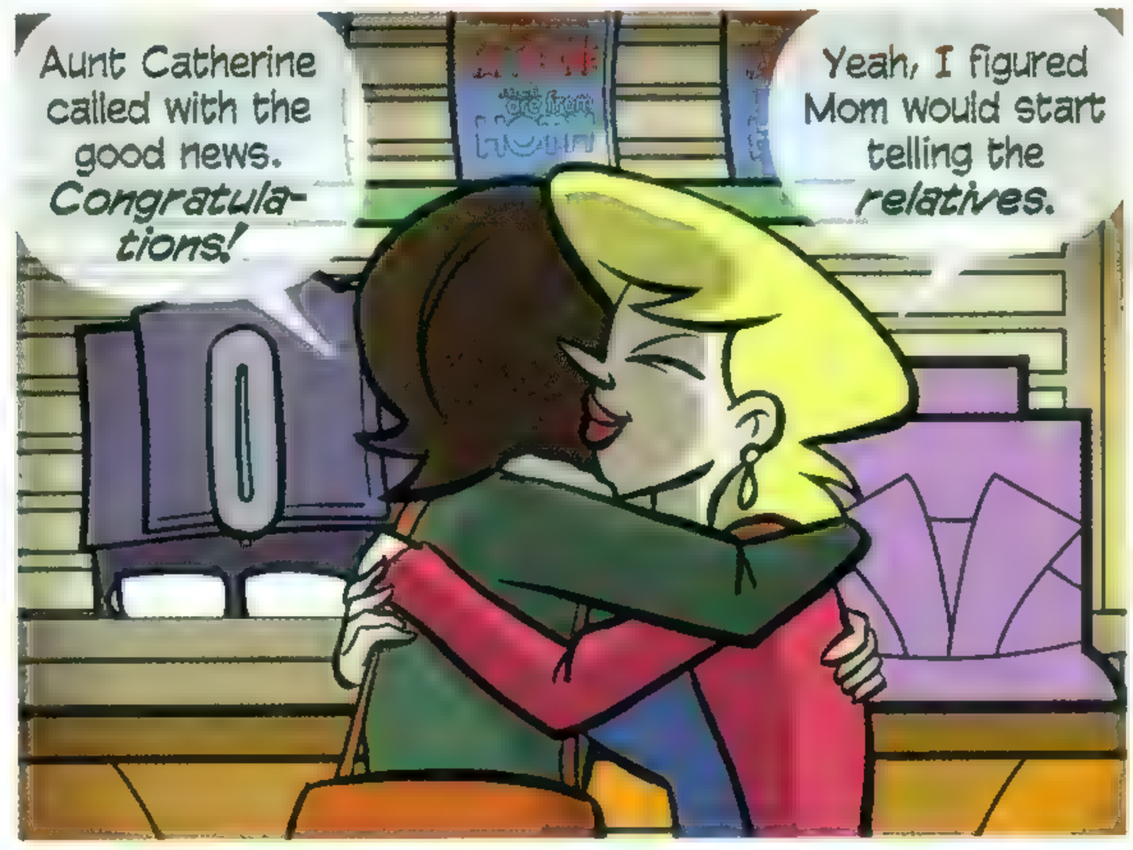

And so...
--so I was wondering if it might be the vitamins that are doing this.
I appreciate that the baby needs them, but I bet she'd appreciate me keeping some food down, too.

What you describe is indeed possible, Abigail. I have encountered this issue on occasion.
Some mothers' systems react poorly to the extra iron.


I suggest that you purchase some children's vitamins. They contain nearly the same nutrients, minus the offending mineral.
You mean like Flintstones chewables?
Aye, or any similar brand would suffice.

You know, you could have mentioned that alternative before I spent the money on this prescription.
'Tis hard to put a price on good health.
Not really. I can tell you exactly how much.

Then...
Abby, look who dropped by!
Olivia!


Aunt Catherine called with the good news. Congratulations!
Yeah, I figured Mom would start telling the relatives.

And how about you? You've dropped all that baby weight already!
Well, thank you for the jogging stroller.
Any advice you can share with a first time mom-to-be?

Yes. Kegels.
As much as you can. Trust me.
Got it.

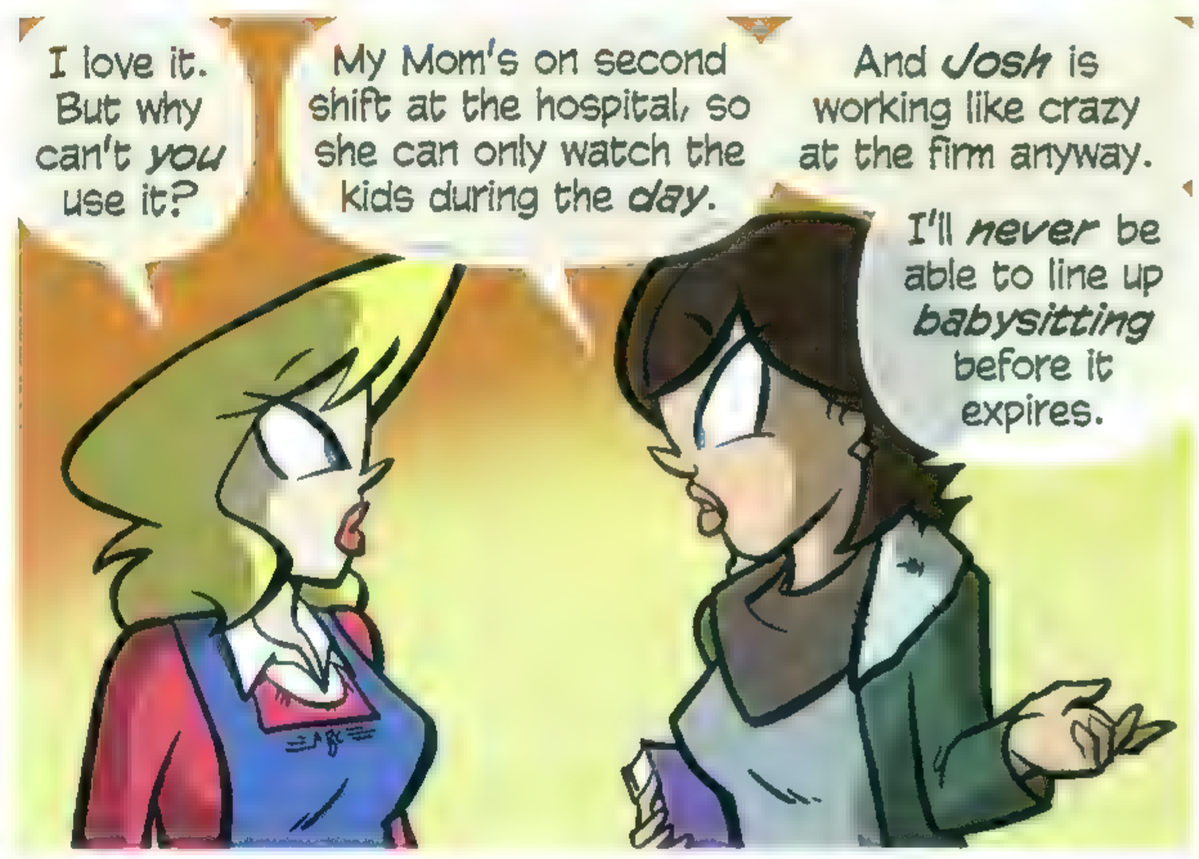
How are *Carter* and *Aidan* doing with their new *baby sister?*
They loved her up until she started *crawling* and getting into their *toys.*
Hey, Carter's been asking for this book!

I can't believe you have *three* now. I'm worried about *one.*
It's kind of *nice* having a newborn in the house again. Though it does come with some *trade-offs.*

Like *late-night feedings.*
Sleep while you *can,* Abby. Sleep hard.

That bad?
Tina's like the most *adorable* form of *sleep deprivation torture* ever invented.
Between that and her *chemical weapon diapers,* she is *quite* the force to be reckoned with.

Three-thirty *already?* Ugh! I have to go relieve my Mom. *How much* is the book?
Don't worry about it. The world can always use *new readers.*
Well, in that case, do you like *Asian fusion?* I have a gift certificate to *Jiāyáo.*


I love it. But why can't *you* use it?
My Mom's on second shift at the hospital, so she can only watch the kids during the *day.*
And *Josh* is working like crazy at the firm anyway.
I'll *never* be able to line up *babysitting* before it expires.

That's *not right.* You *deserve* a night out.
What if *Mark and I* babysit for you?
Really? You wouldn't mind--?

It'd be *our pleasure.*
Besides, I *know* how important it is to carve out time with someone who's got a *super*-busy schedule

CHRONOPOLIS...
Was today pretty quiet for you?
Not really. I had to deal with one of the Chromatic Tyrants.

Which one?
Magenta.
That's wrath, right?
No, that's Scarlet. Magenta is apathy.

I thought Indigo was apathy.
No, he's disease.
What? That's not even an emotion.

Whatever.
He's black and blue now.

LATER...
Problem?
No, Abby just needs me to pick up something on the way home.

Is she getting cravings?
Not yet. She just wants me to stop at the drugstore.
Oh. I was thinking she was asking for a Chili Dog from Pink's or something.

That does sound good though, right?
If you're flyin', I'm buyin'.

THAT EVENING...
Look, it's my delivery service.
You know, not everyone gets this level of service.

Not everyone's married to you either.
You do have a point.
Here's your order.

Amazonia Chewable Vitamins?
Seriously? Seriously?
Hey, they were on sale.
DAYS PEACE & MUSIC

Hmmm, cloying, artifically sweet, bitter aftertaste--
--yeah, that's about right.

THEN...
So what's the verdict on the vitamins?
They're staying down, so I think we have a winner.

Hey, my cousin Olivia came into the store today and we got to talking.
Anyway, I volunteered us to babysit some weekend. I thought it'd be good for us because, well, you know...

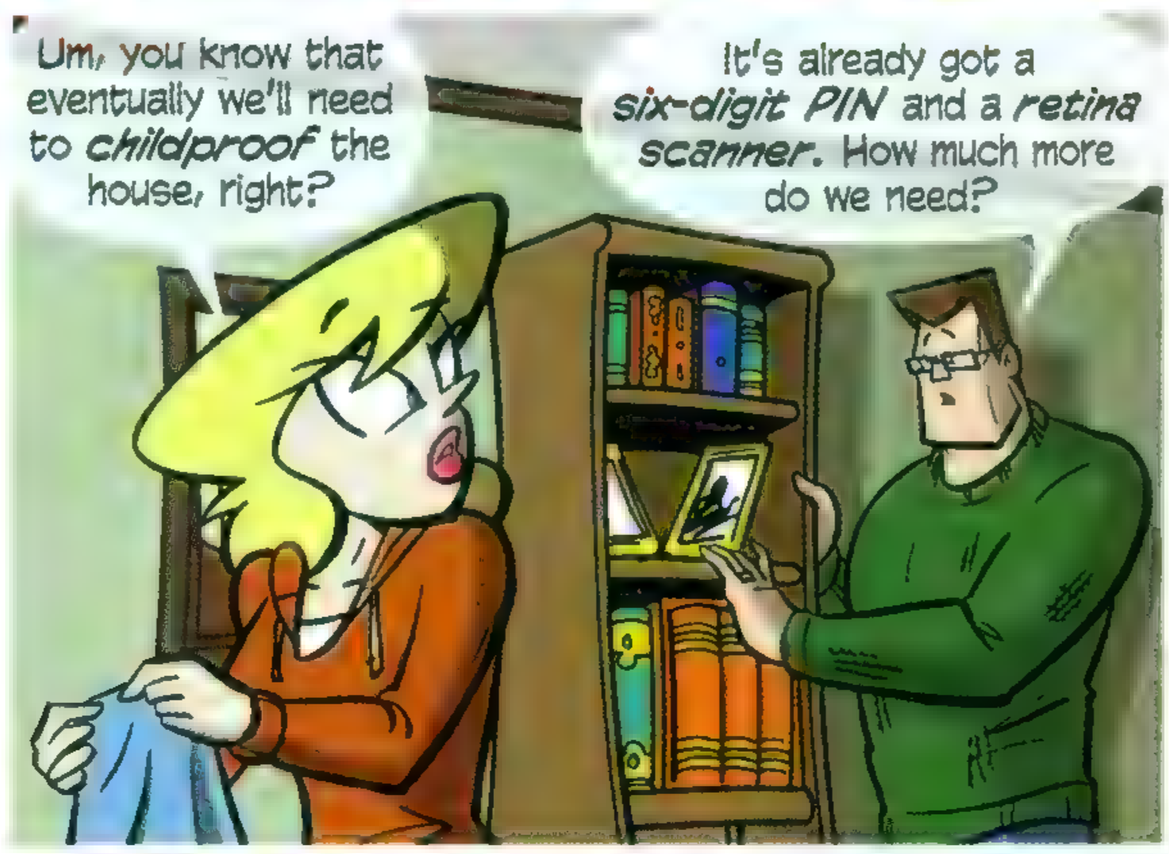
Sure, you want to beta test our parenting skills using someone else's child.
Well, I wouldn't put it that way.

Am I wrong?
That's not the point.

LATER....
What did you do to that uniform anyway?
It took three washes to get it clean.

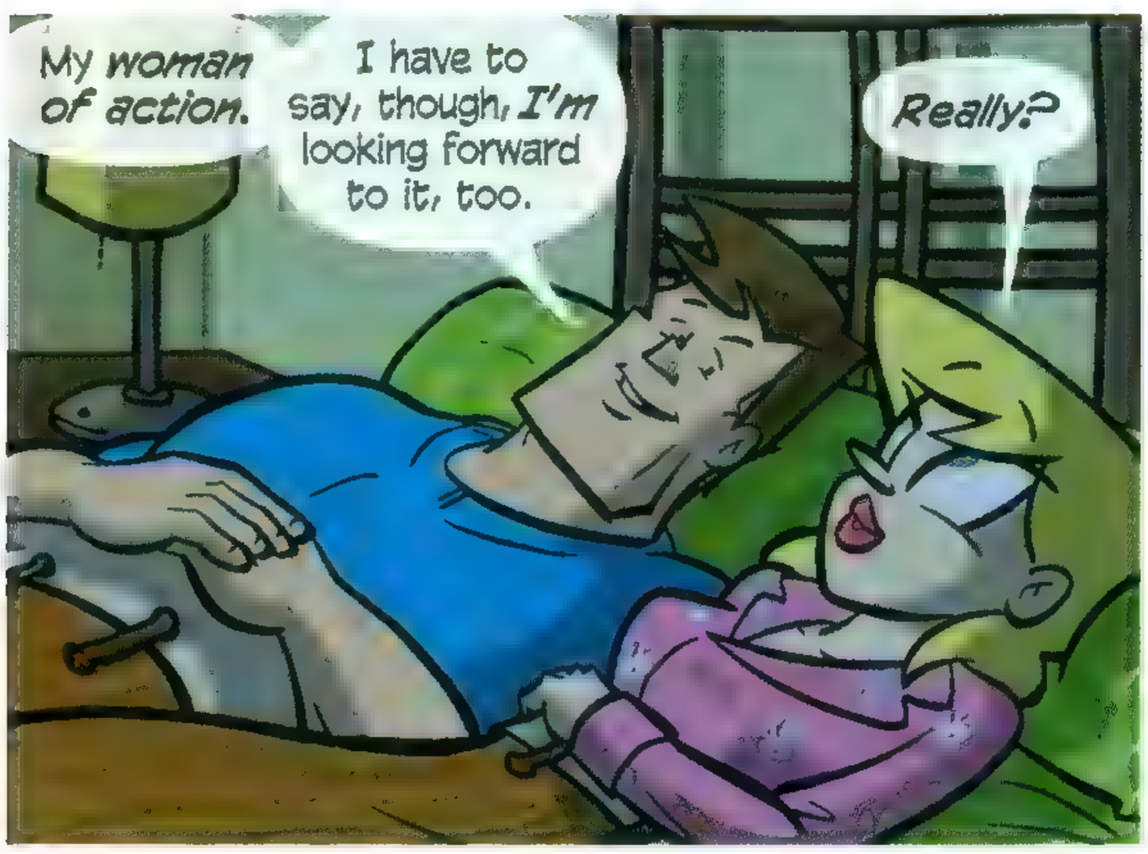
Home Soil and Liquidity decided it'd be a good idea to team up.
But they didn't mix as well as they thought.

Lock enabled. System sealed. Self-destruct security mode engaged.


Um, you know that eventually we'll need to childproof the house, right?
It's already got a six-digit PIN and a retina scanner. How much more do we need?

THAT NIGHT...
I texted Olivia. She said either of the next two weekends are good for babysitting.
They're both fine for me.

You're really excited by this, aren't you?
Well, yeah. So much of pregnancy is waiting. It'll be nice to do something for it.

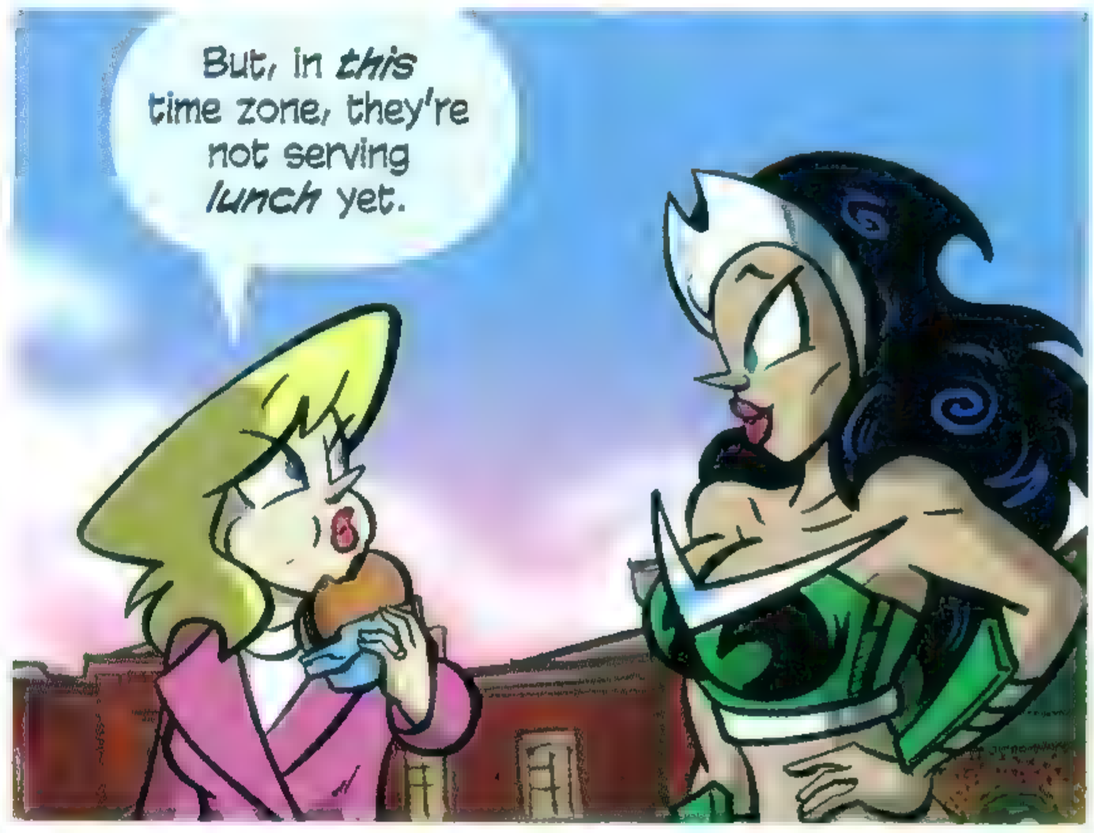

My woman of action.
I have to say, though, I'm looking forward to it, too.
Really?

So what, then, are the chances of you having to rush off for some emergency that night?
That depends on whether or not the baby needs her diaper changed.

LATER...
Come on, where are you--?
Abby!

Amazonia! Thanks for doing this. Mark's on monitor duty and--
I'm glad to help out my pregnant friend, Abby.

But don't you have a Captain Bellybuster's in Deco City?
Lots.


But, in this time zone, they're not serving lunch yet.

So, beyond your overpowering craving for a Cheesy Baconamageddon, any other pregnancy changes?

I have started to get tired a lot more.
And, obviously, I've joined Club Amazonia.

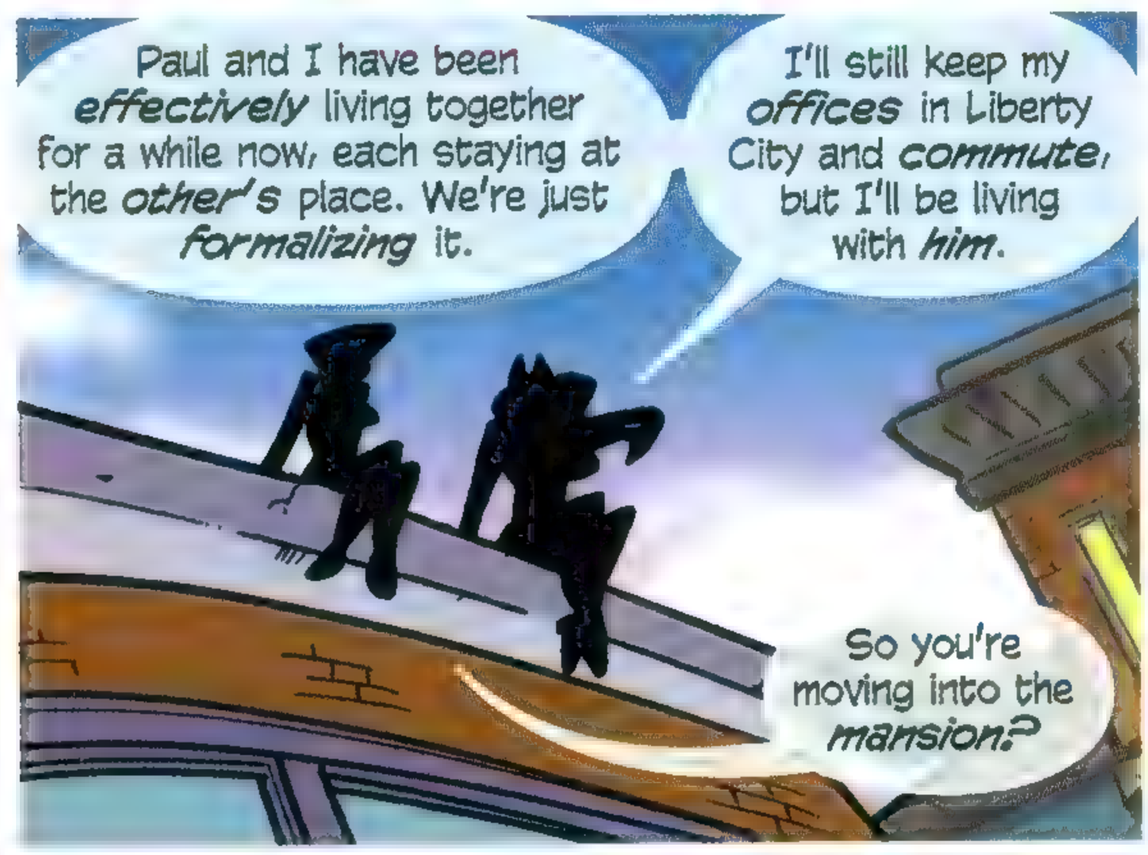
Well, maybe as a junior member.

And what's new in the *world* of *Amazonia?*
I *did* finally stop Augustus Nero from trying to unleash the *Spirit of Vengance* on Liberty City.

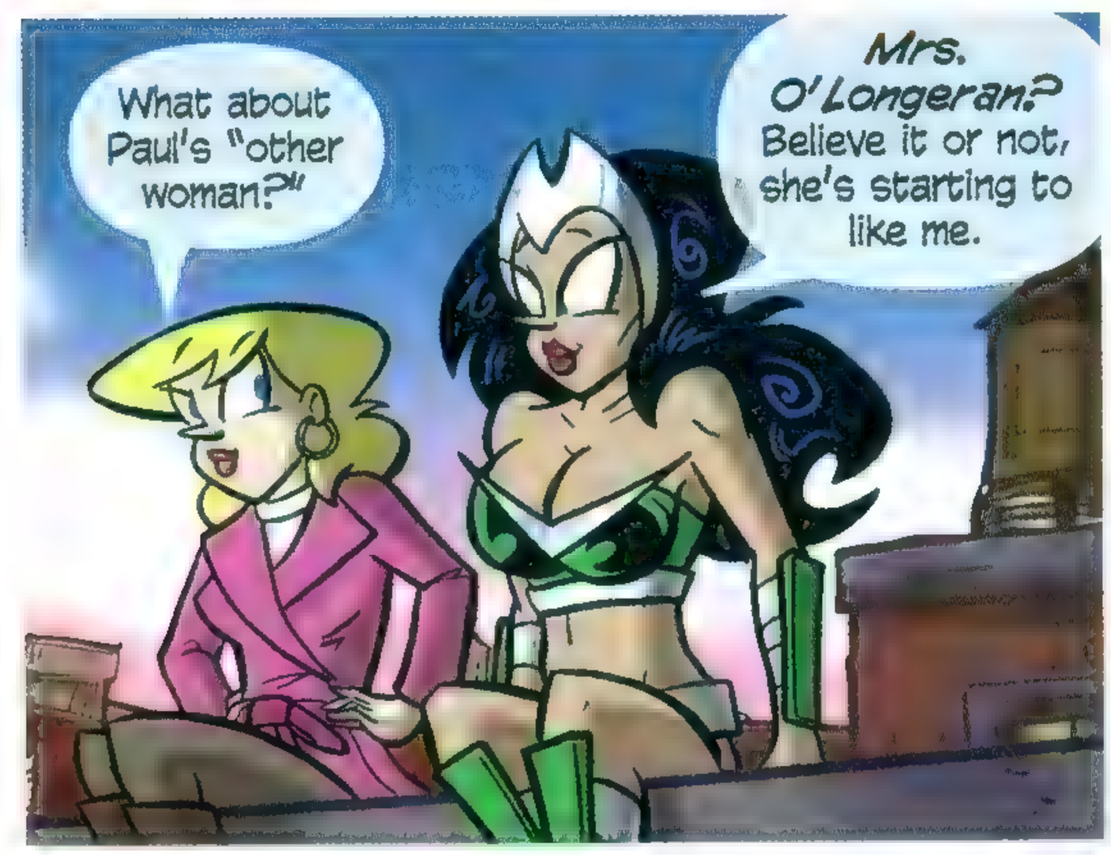
But the *big news* is that Paul and I are *moving in together*.
That's *great!*

Finally getting tired of the *long distance* thing?
Oh, it's not so much *that*.

I mean, it's hardly long distance when you can *fly*, and have a *jet* and a *teleporter*.
True.


Paul and I have been *effectively* living together for a while now, each staying at the *other's* place. We're just *formalizing* it.
I'll still keep my *offices* in Liberty City and *commute*, but I'll be living with *him*.
So you're moving into the *mansion?*

I bet he's probably got closet space to *spare* in there.
Not that *your* clothes take up a lot of space.
No, but the *weapons* sure do. Swords don't fold.


What about Paul's "other woman?"
Mrs. O'Longeran? Believe it or not, she's starting to like me.

Really?
Well--
--maybe *"tolerate"* is a better word.

THE DECO CITY ART MUSEUM...
--and you arranged all of this, Charlotte?
The museum has been doing this Local Artists Spotlight since the Sixties, but they let me handle it this year.

They really should just hire you.
You're preaching to the choir, Paul. For now, it's still an internship.
Now, I had an ulterior motive in inviting you tonight.

I had a feeling.
Say, that's striking.
It is. It's by an artist named Scott Profenno. He's really talented.
Let me guess, you want me to buy it?

No, Paul--
I want you to buy his next one.

That piece is going to sell for about seven grand. Nice sale for him, and the PR will ripple out.
But, if that piece gets him the attention of Billionaire Paul LaCroix, those ripples become waves.

I'm not asking you for a favor, Paul, Im asking you for an investment. You buy his next one, the one after that goes for ten.
Next year, you'll be able to sell that painting for double if not more.
And Scott is riding his success like a rocket.

Impressive.
You really learned a lot in France, didn't you?
Definitely--

--including that the '03 Beaujolais should be served slightly chilled, not room temperature!
What, are we BARBARIANS?!

THEN...

By the way, *thank you* for all the advice about moving in with Amazonia.

I wasn't telling you anything you *didn't already know* Paul.

Maybe.

But I'm kind of used to being the one people come to for *answers*.

Having a *real* relationship, that's a *whole new world* for me.

And it's *different* being the one *asking the questions*.

Plus, I did it all *without* standing on a rooftop *looking broody*.

I *didn't* say you were *perfect*.

Have you told *Mark* yet?

He *knows* I've been thinking about it. I've been *reticent* about telling him too much.

He's been great with the *awkwardness* of my relationship with someone he used to date. But I didn't want to push it *too far*.

Besides, Zoe saw your sister this morning. I'm *sure* she mentioned it to Abby.

Yeah, they're *such a couple* telling *one* is like telling them *both*.

Oh! You'd better get ready to go. *Channel Seven News* is going to be coming by looking to catch a *glimpse* of you.

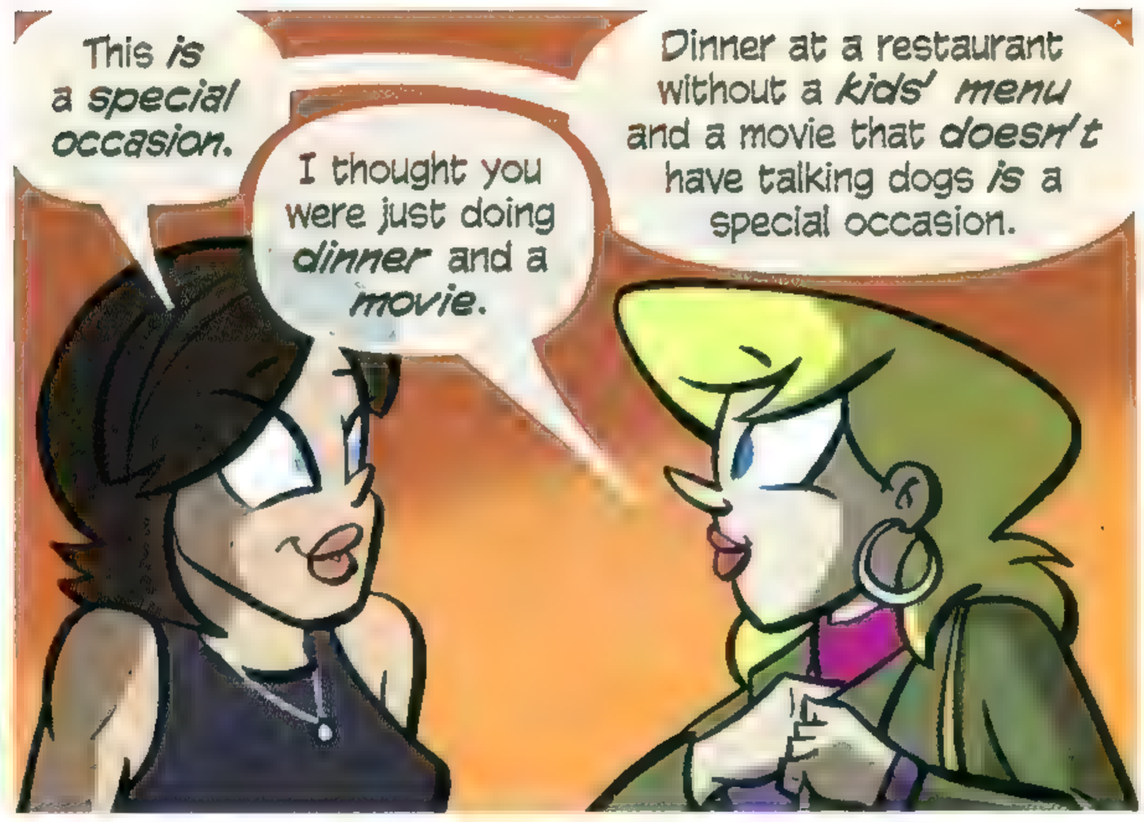
How did they know I was here?

I *texted* them twenty minutes ago. A fleeting shot of you is *good PR*.

You do know if you start using that sneaky mind of yours for *criminal purposes*, I will *hunt* you down.

You might *try*.

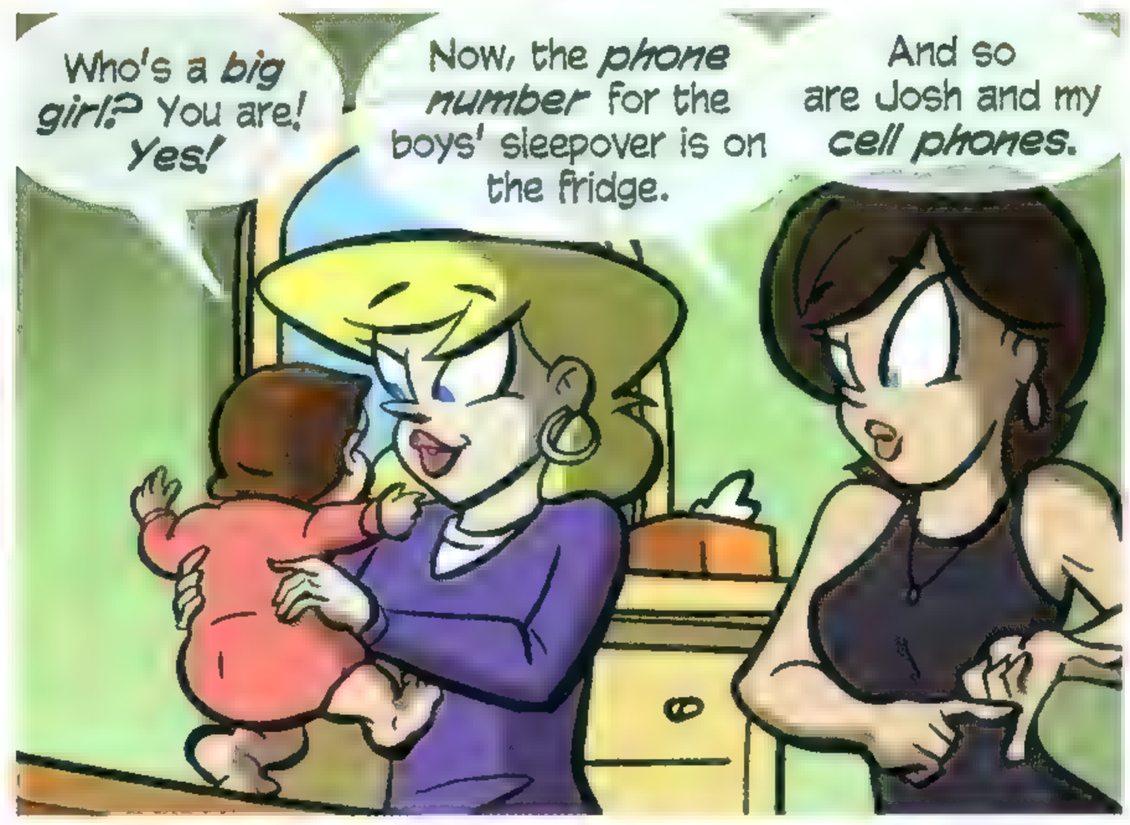
SATURDAY NIGHT...
Hey, there are our babysitters!.
Wow! Someone looks ready for a big night.

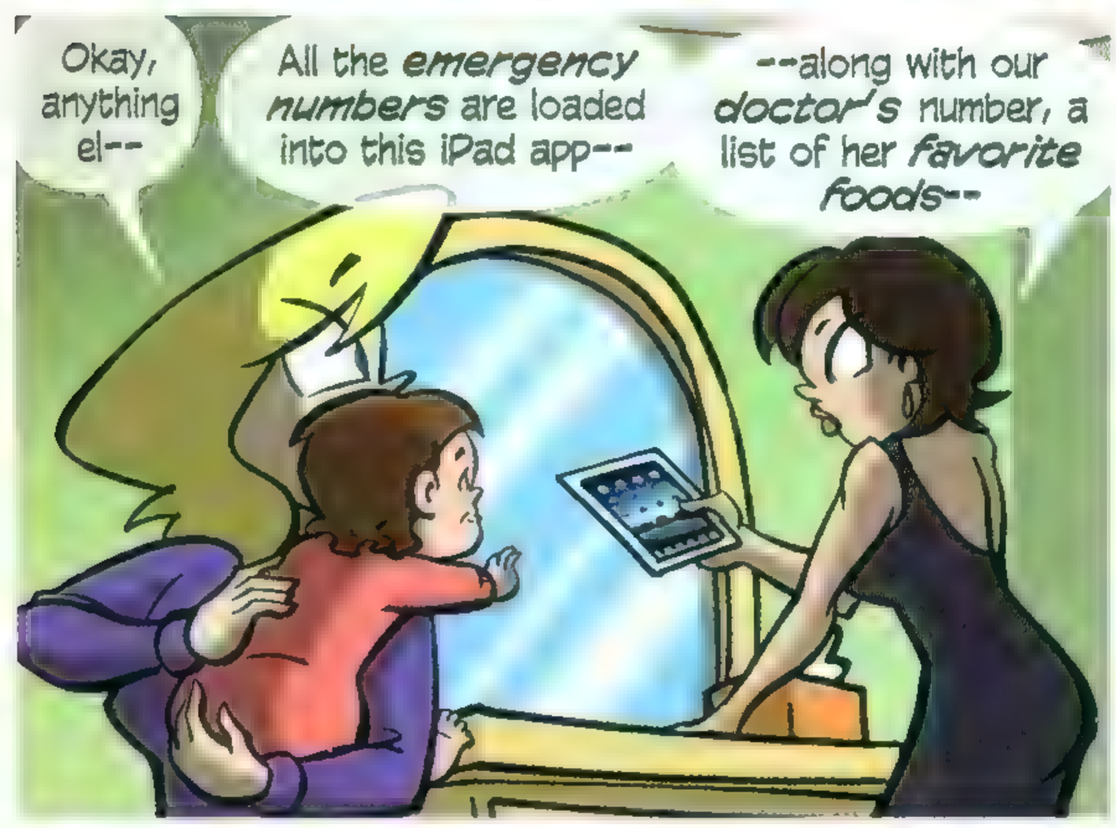

This is a special occasion.
I thought you were just doing dinner and a movie.
Dinner at a restaurant without a kids' menu and a movie that doesn't have talking dogs is a special occasion.

You got lucky, though. Carter and Aidan got invited to a sleepover, so it's just the baby.
You didn't need to do that. We could have handled all three.

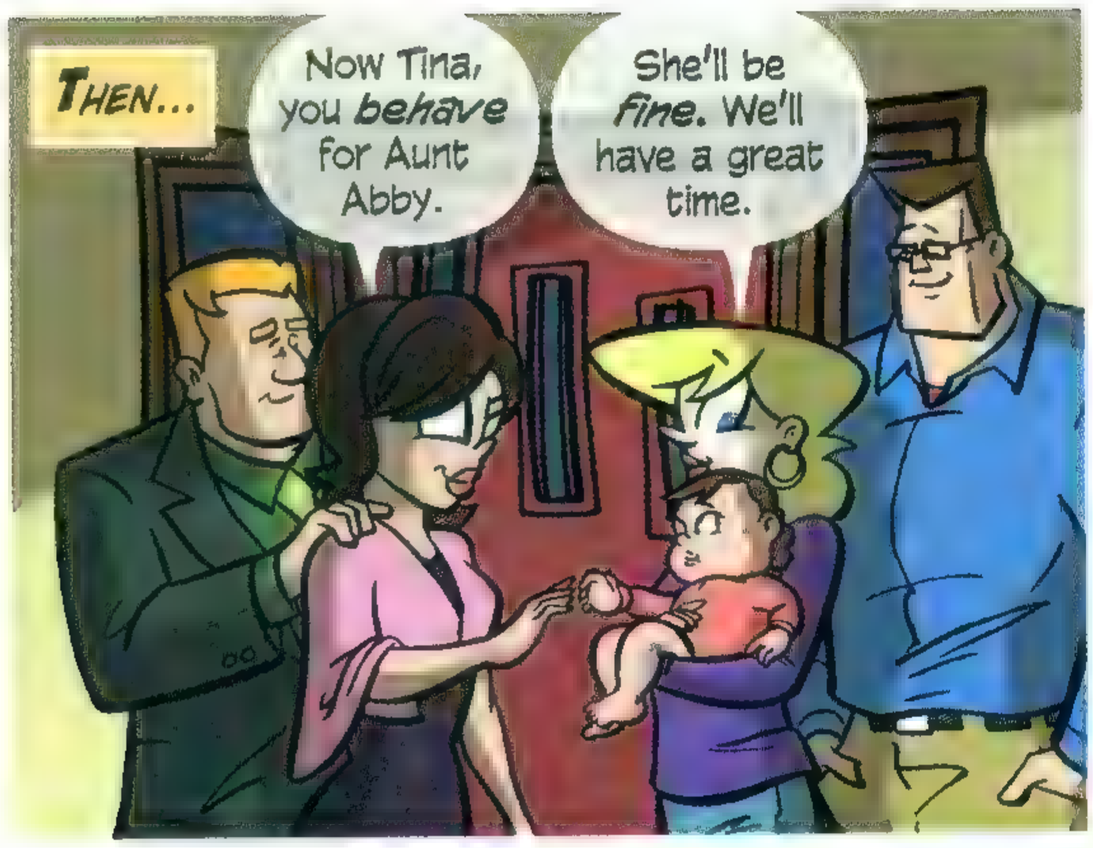
Dude, you could not have handled all three.

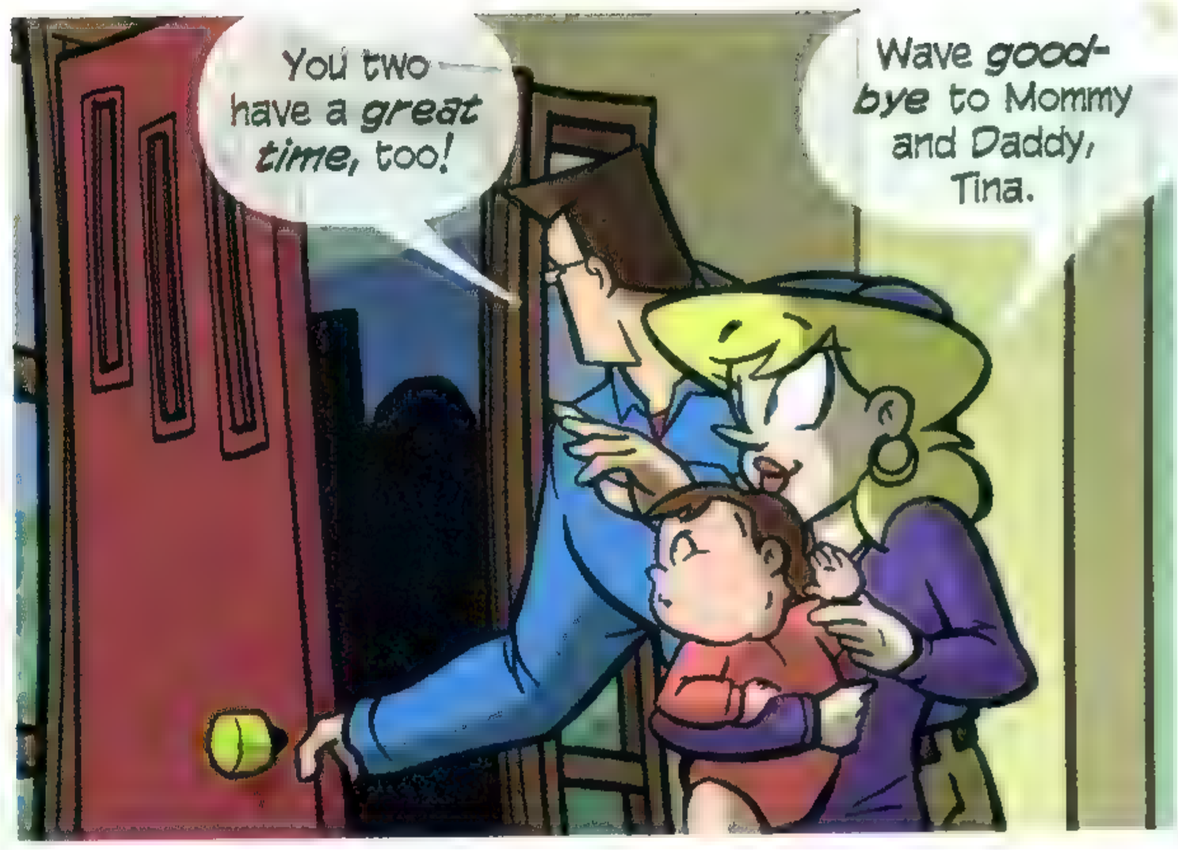
Oh, it looks like someone is just getting up.
She's gotten so big.


Who's a big girl? You are! Yes!
Now, the phone number for the boys' sleepover is on the fridge.
And so are Josh and my cell phones.

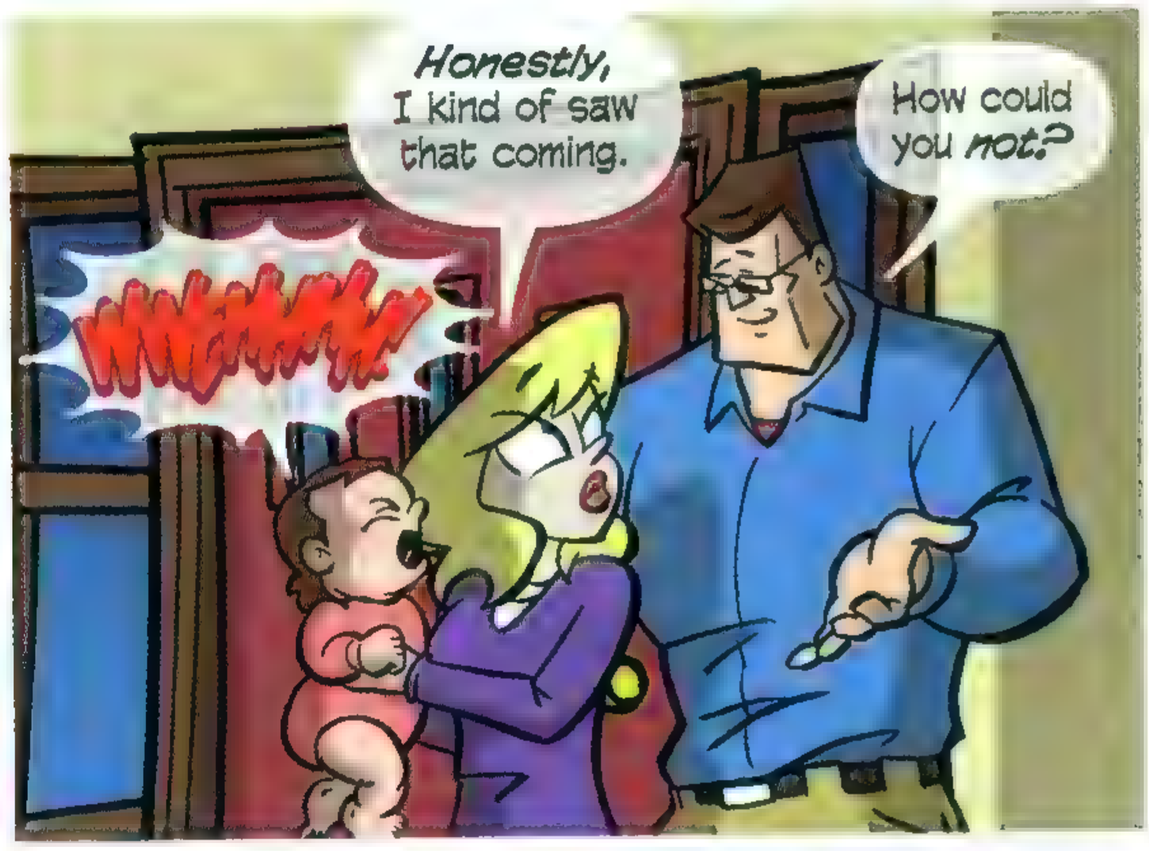

Okay, anything el--
All the emergency numbers are loaded into this iPad app--
--along with our doctor's number, a list of her favorite foods--

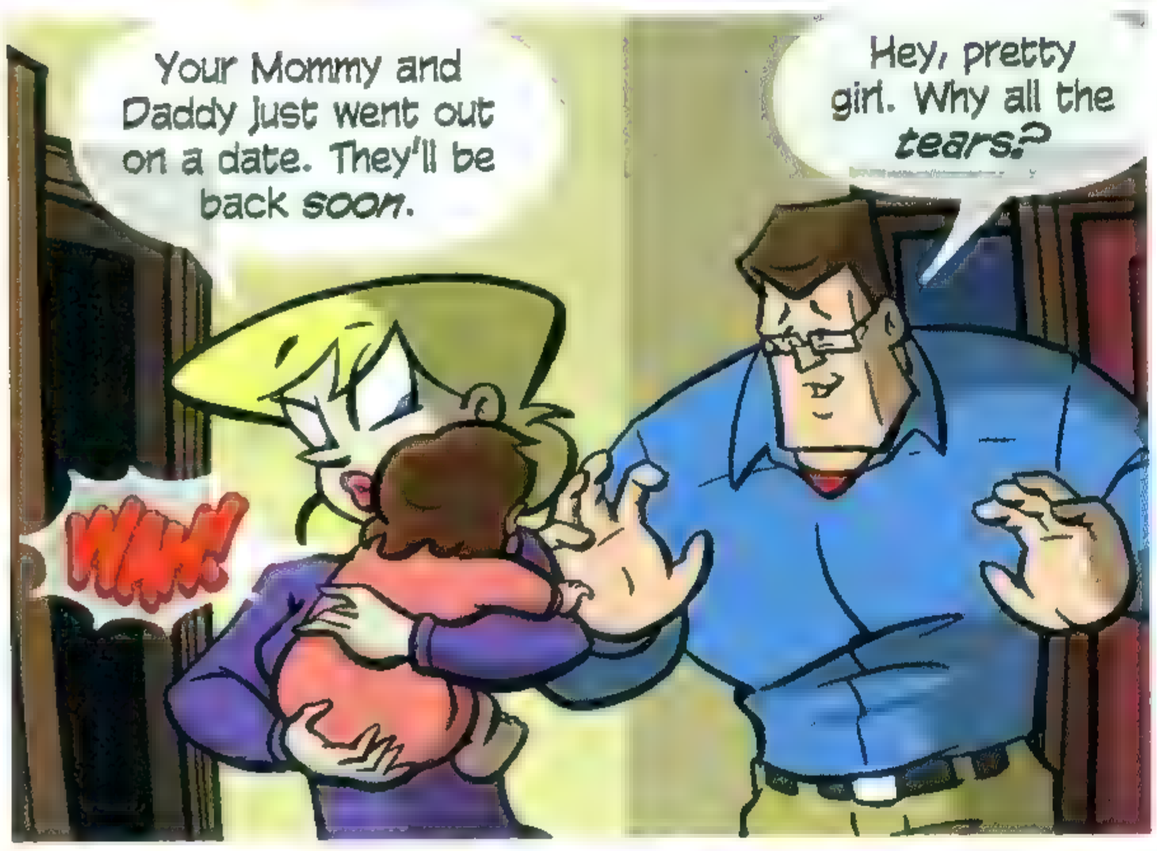
You seem a little more calm about this than Olivia.
Honestly, parenting at this age is pretty much pass/fail.
--toys ranked in order of preference--

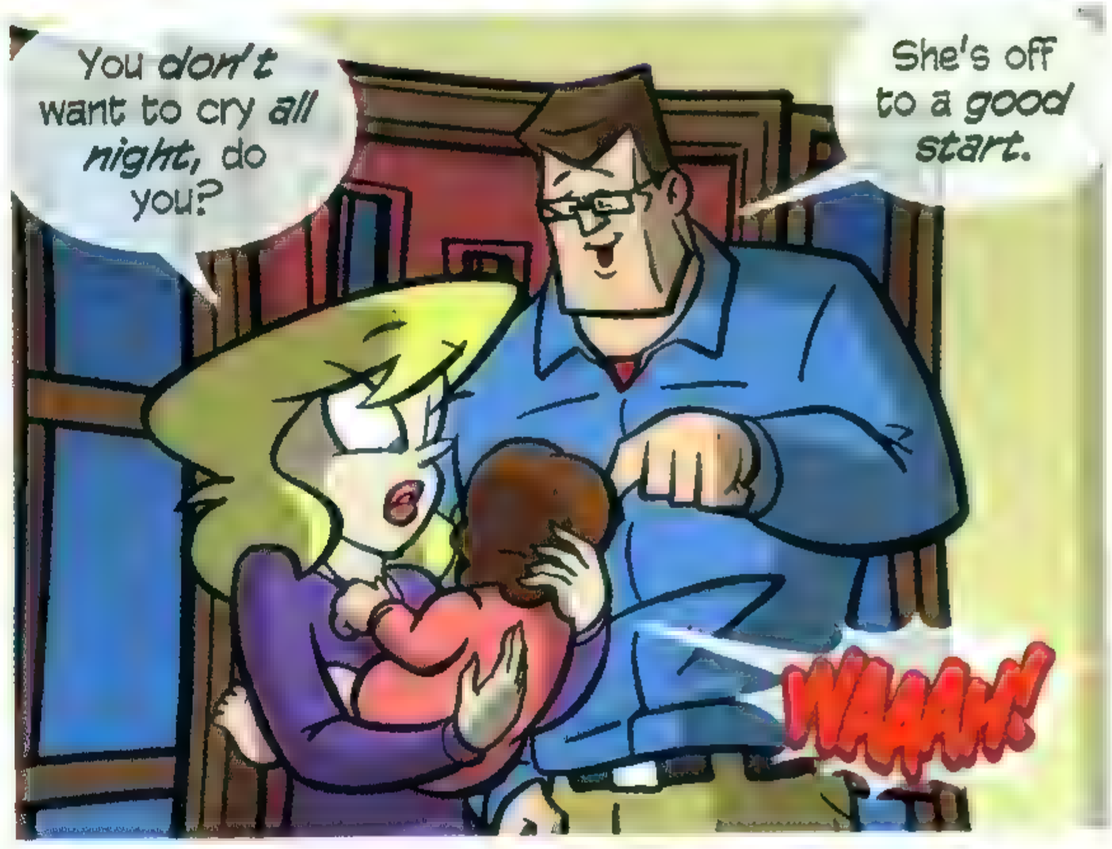

THEN...
Now Tina, you *behave* for Aunt Abby.
She'll be *fine*. We'll have a great time.


You two have a *great time*, too!
Wave *good-bye* to Mommy and Daddy, Tina.

All right, honey, now what do you want to *do* tonight?
...

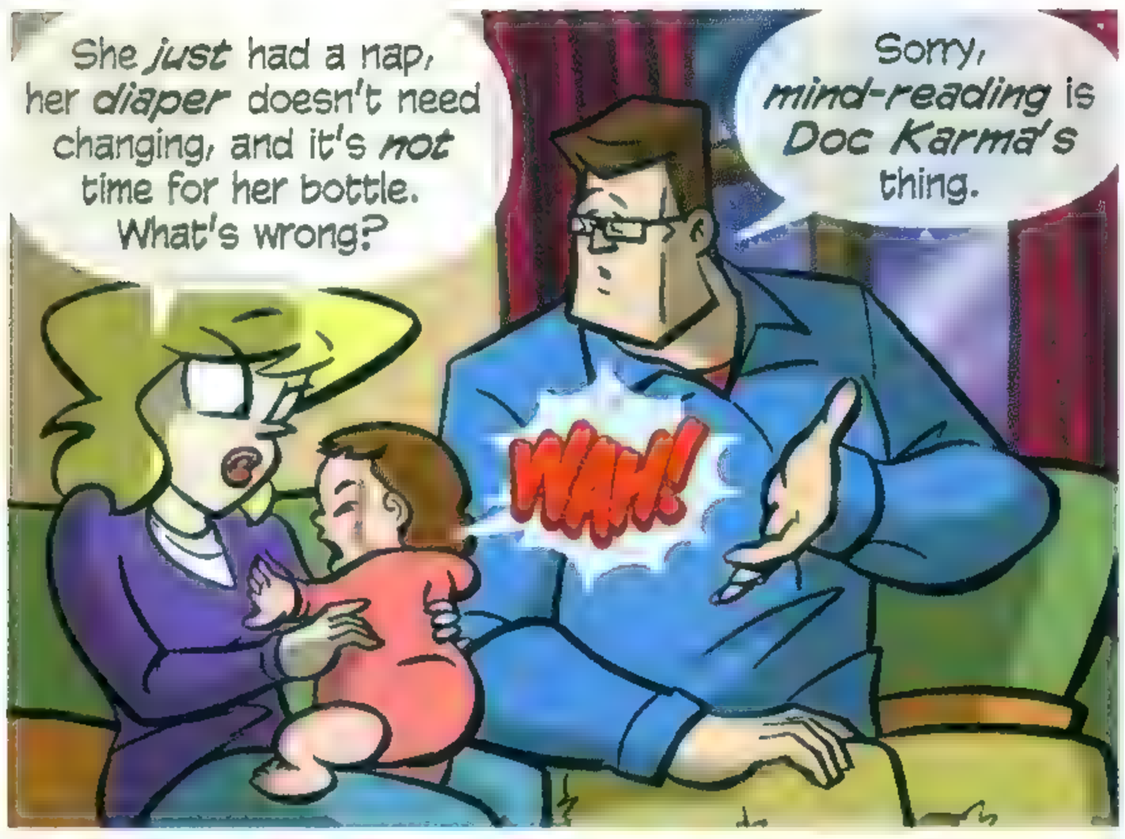

Honestly, I kind of saw that coming.
How could you *not*?
WAAAAH!

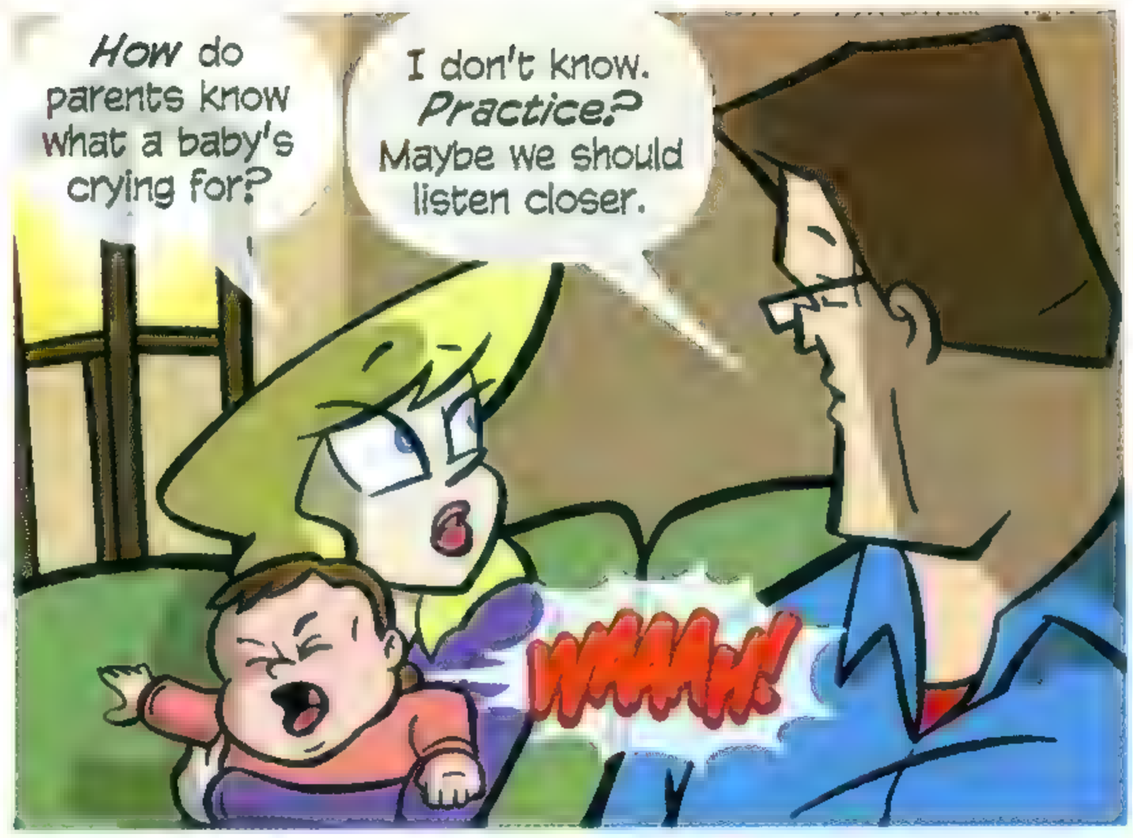

Your Mommy and Daddy just went out on a date. They'll be back *soon*.
Hey, pretty girl. Why all the *tears*?
WAH!


You *don't* want to cry *all night*, do you?
She's off to a *good start*.
WAAAAH!

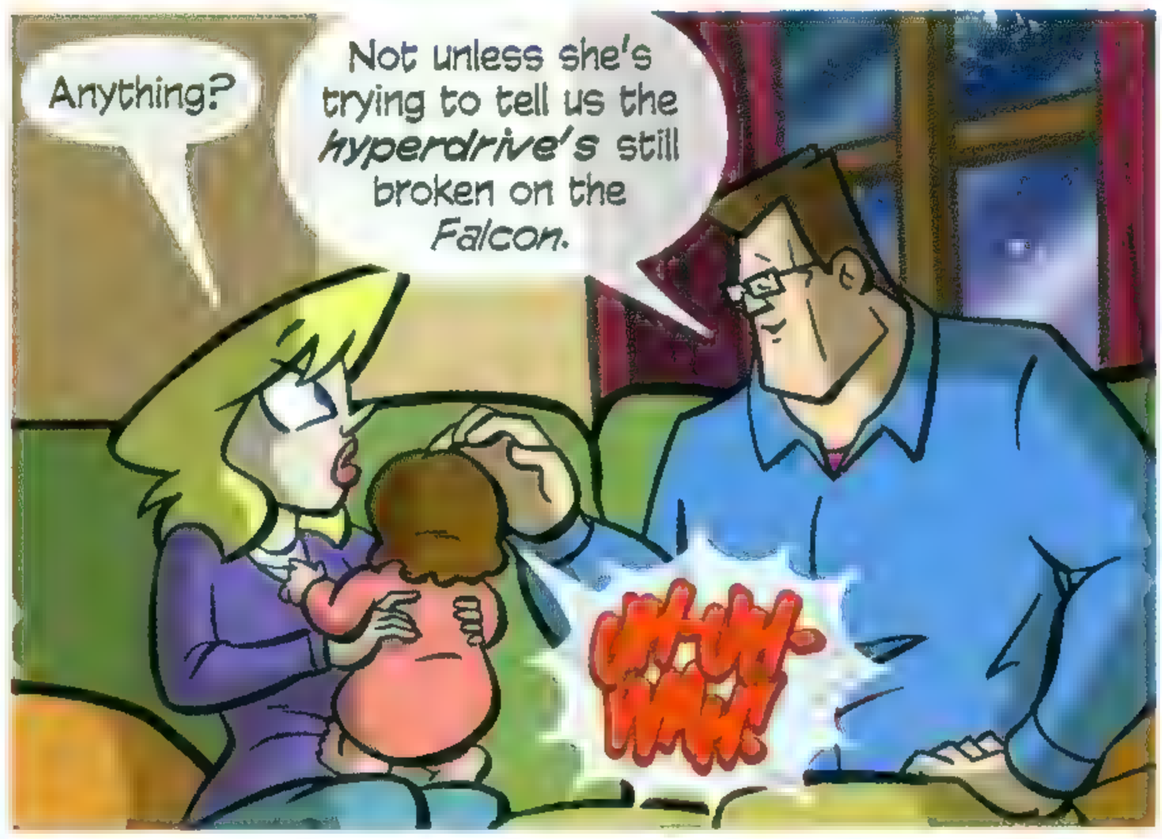
How about a *song*? Maybe that will help?
With a little love...and some tenderness... we'll walk above the water...
UH-UH-WAAAAH!

Well, *now* she's just crying because you're singing *Hootie and the Blowfish*.
WAAH!


She just had a nap, her diaper doesn't need changing, and it's not time for her bottle. What's wrong?
Sorry, mind-reading is Doc Karma's thing.
WAH!


How do parents know what a baby's crying for?
I don't know. Practice? Maybe we should listen closer.
WAAAAH!

WAAAAH! WAAAAH!


Anything?
Not unless she's trying to tell us the hyperdrive's still broken on the Falcon.
WAH!

FINALLY...
I would have quieted her eventually, Mark.
I'm sure, dear.

I mean, I'm good with kids. In high school, I was the most popular babysitter on my block.

Parenting is a team sport, Abby, not a competition.
That's good--

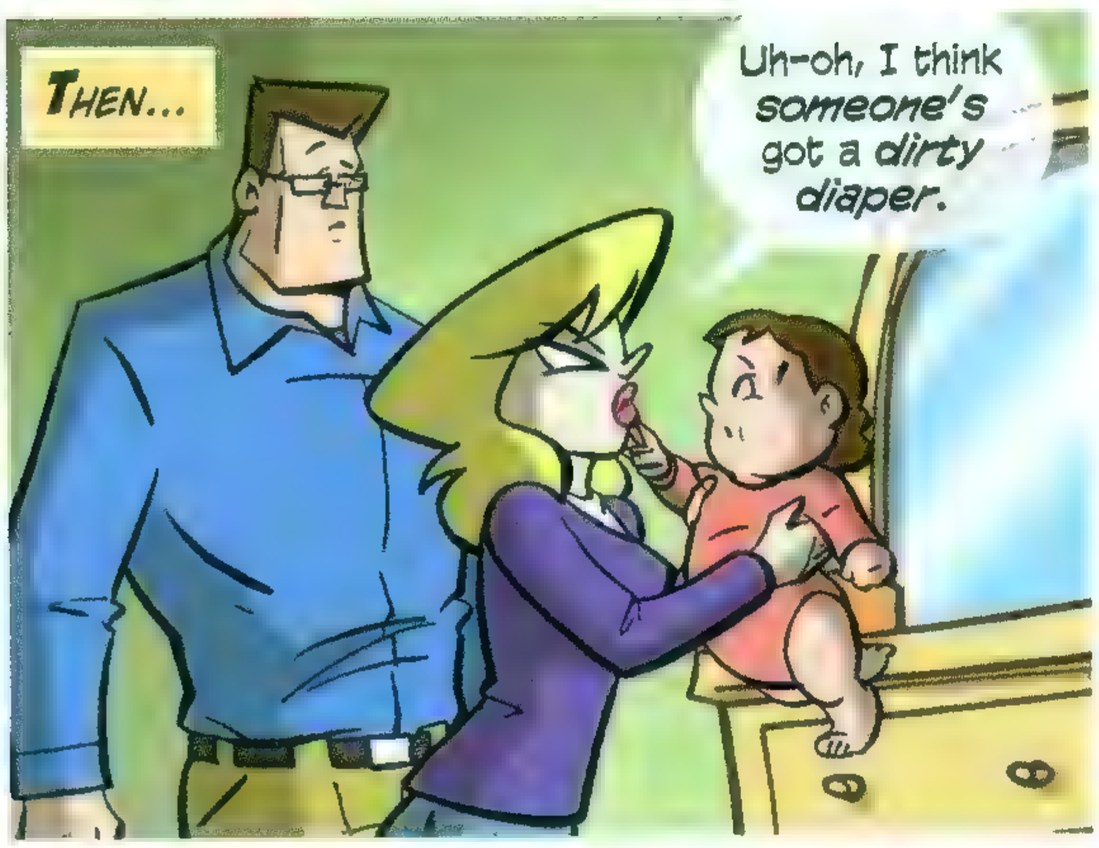
--because you are seriously cheating right now.

LATER...
Mark, I'm going to go start her dinner. Have you got her?
We'll be fine.

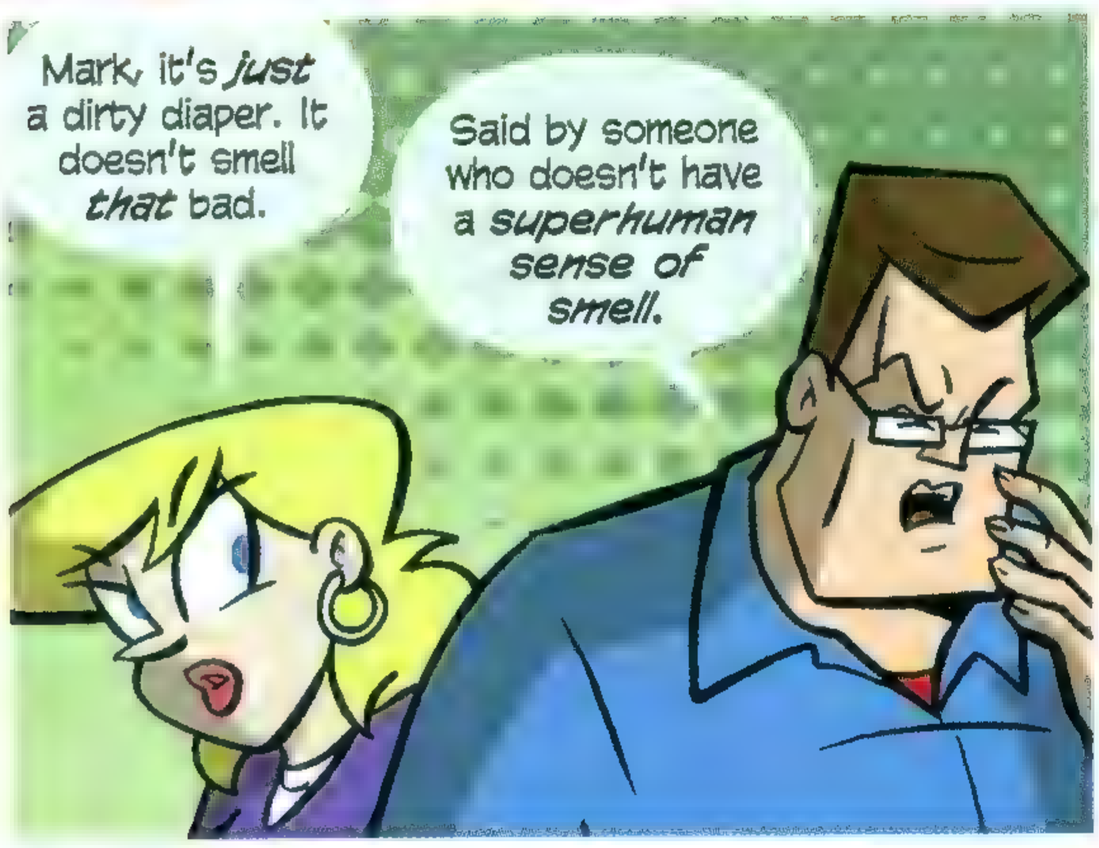
Okay, Tina, which toy are you going to go for?

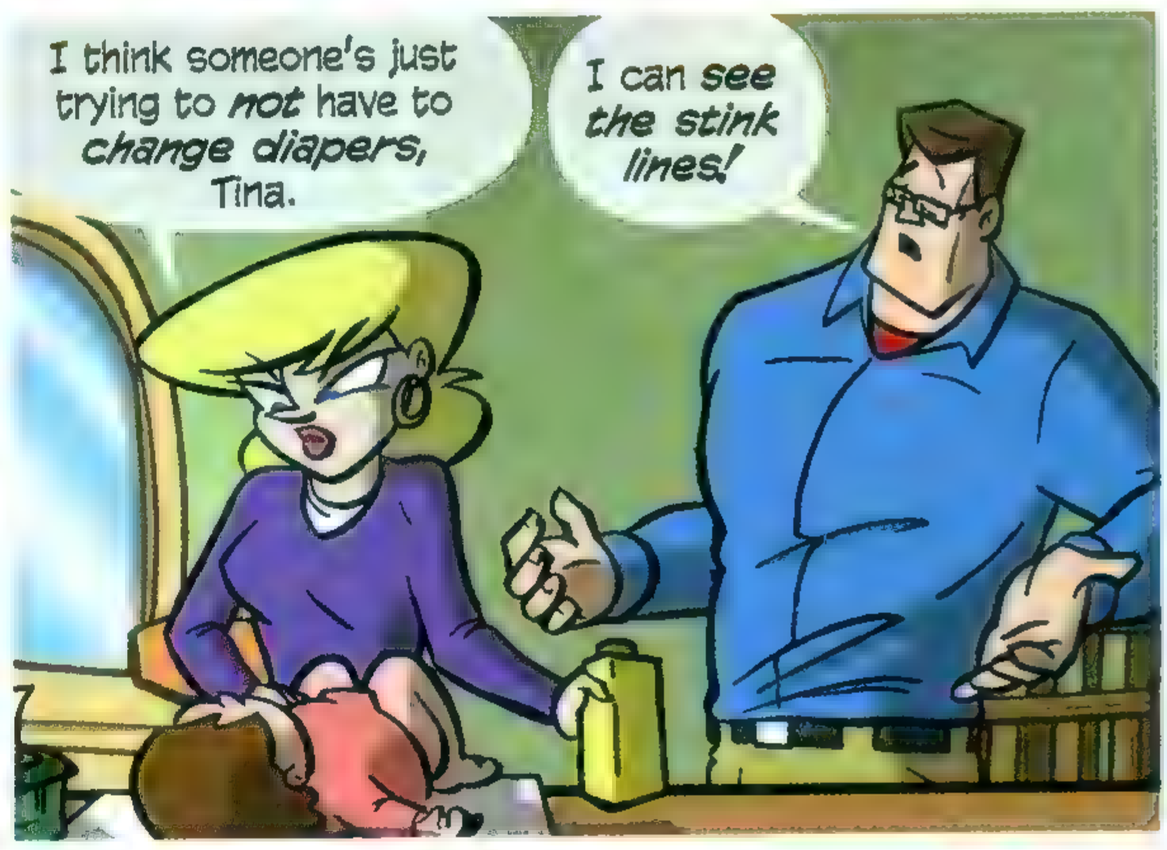
No, no! Rookie mistake!
You never go after the big guy first. It's always the little guy controlling him.

Mark...are you teaching the baby combat tactics?
What? You want her to learn this on the street?

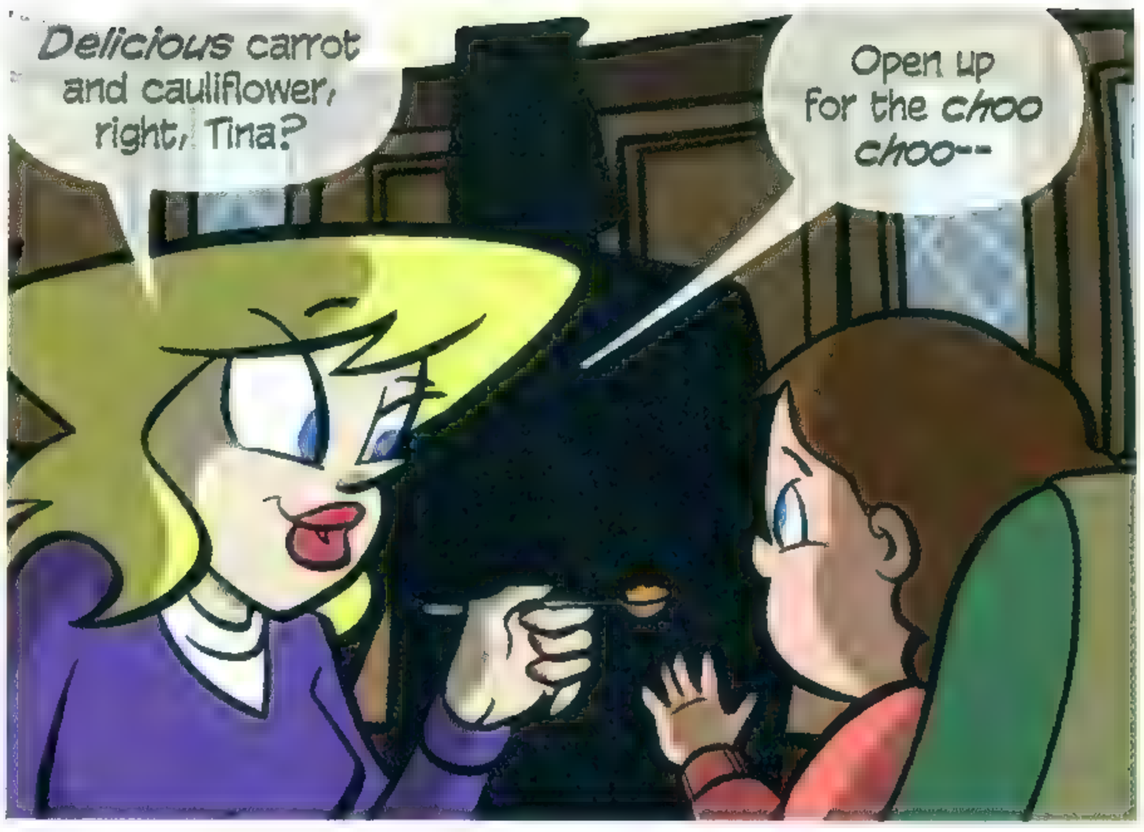

THEN...
Uh-oh, I think someone's got a dirty diaper.

Oh, yes you do. No wonder you were grouchy.
OH, SWEET MOTHER OF GOD!


Mark, it's just a dirty diaper. It doesn't smell that bad.
Said by someone who doesn't have a superhuman sense of smell.


I think someone's just trying to not have to change diapers, Tina.
I can see the stink lines!

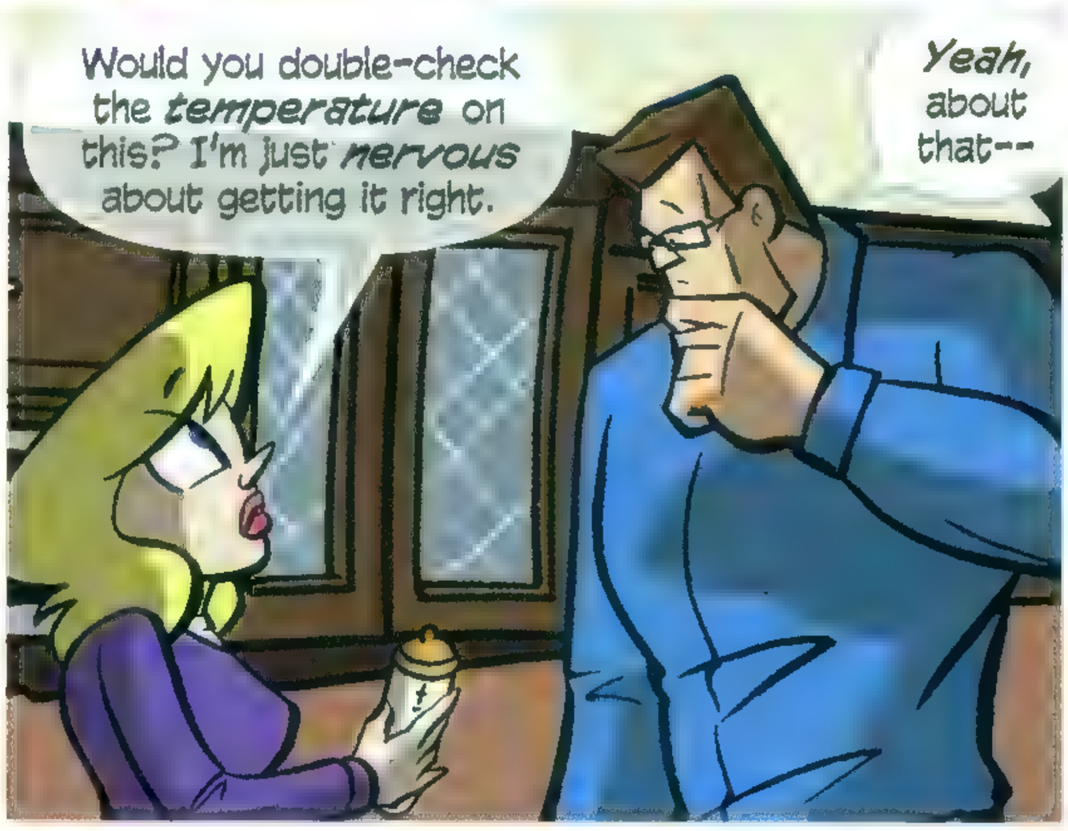
THEN...
And what fine repast did you prepare for the lady?
Puried carrot and cauliflower.


Delicious carrot and cauliflower, right, Tina?
Open up for the choo choo--

SPLAT!

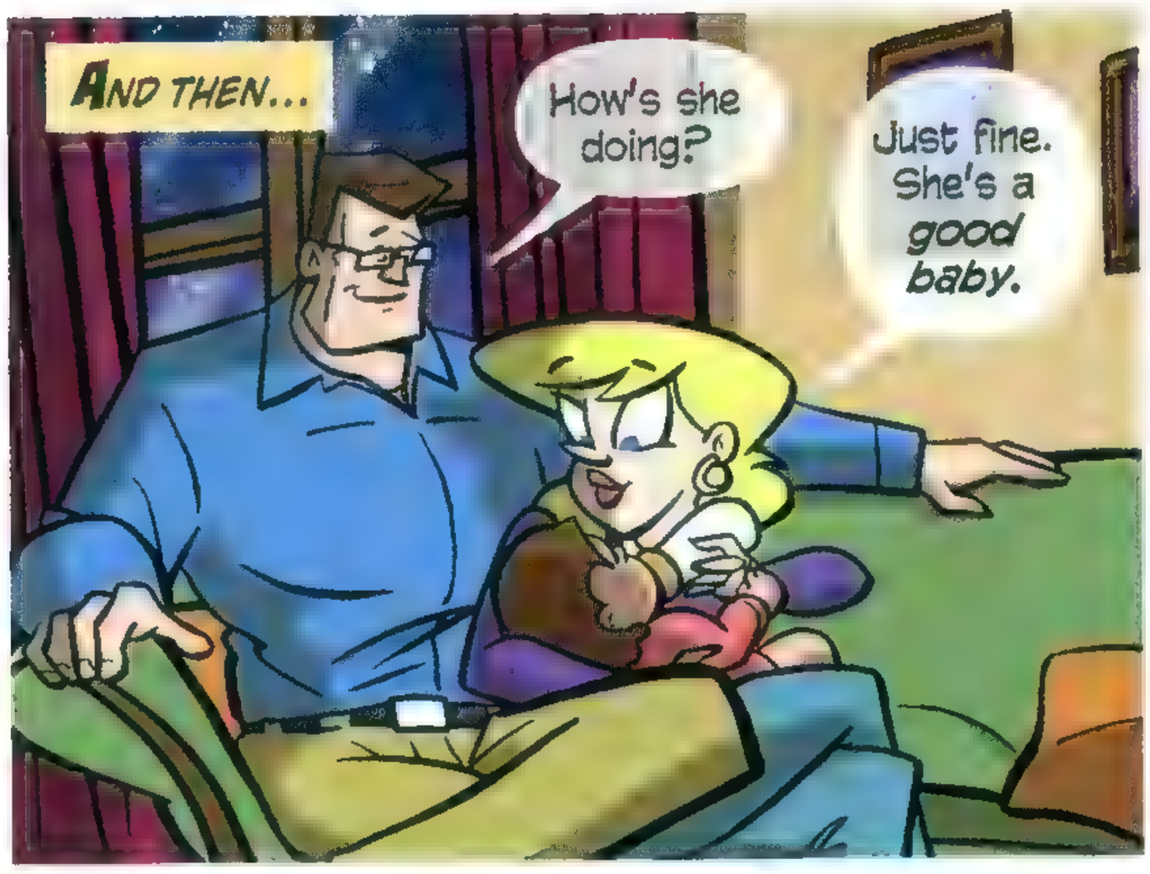
You do have super speed, you know.
I do know. That's how I got out of the way.

AND...
Mark, could you come here for a minute?
Sure, honey.

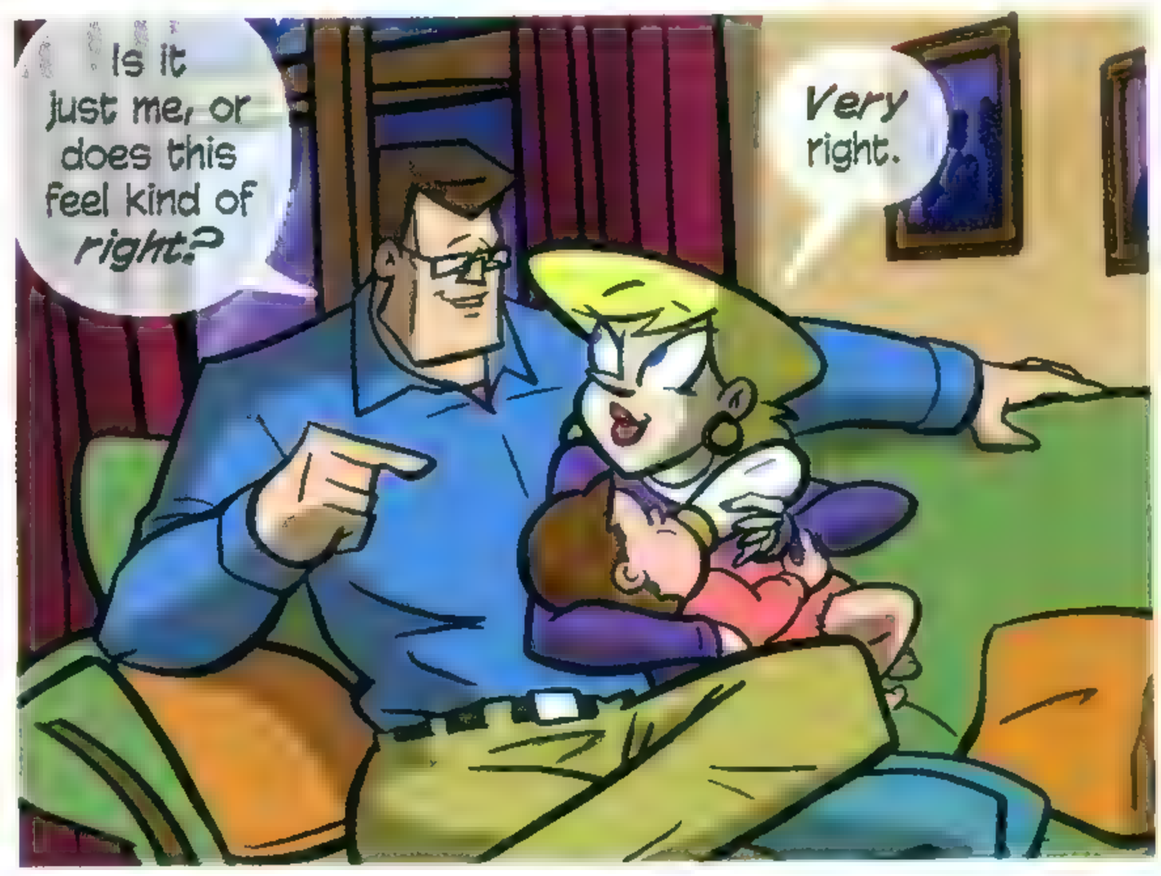

Would you double-check the temperature on this? I'm just nervous about getting it right.
Yeah, about that--

--I'm invulnerable, remember? I'm really not going to be a good judge of hot or cold.

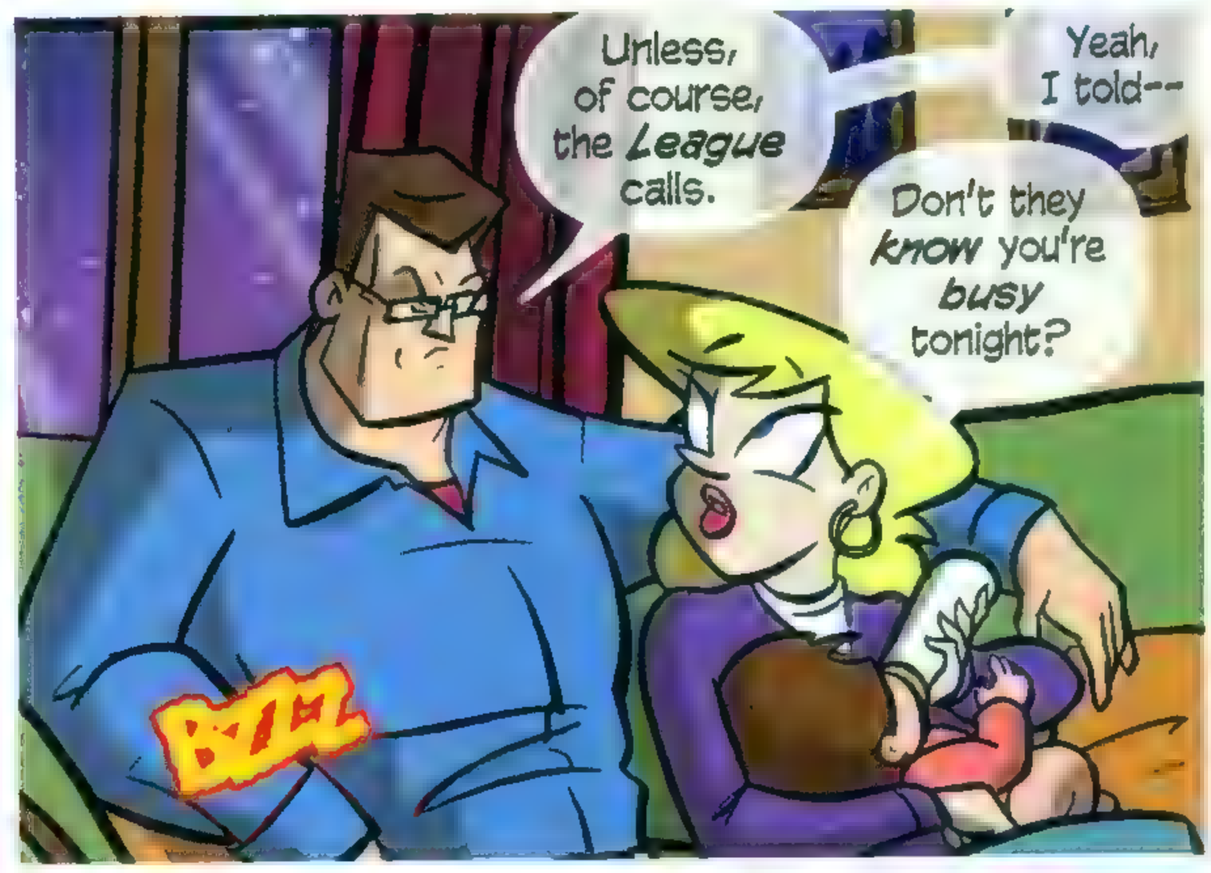
So what you're saying is you're going to be no help whatsoever with our baby.
Not at all.
Let me check on Amazon for a baby bottle warmer.


AND THEN...
How's she doing?
Just fine. She's a *good baby.*

I am so *glad* your mother let us watch you tonight, Tina.

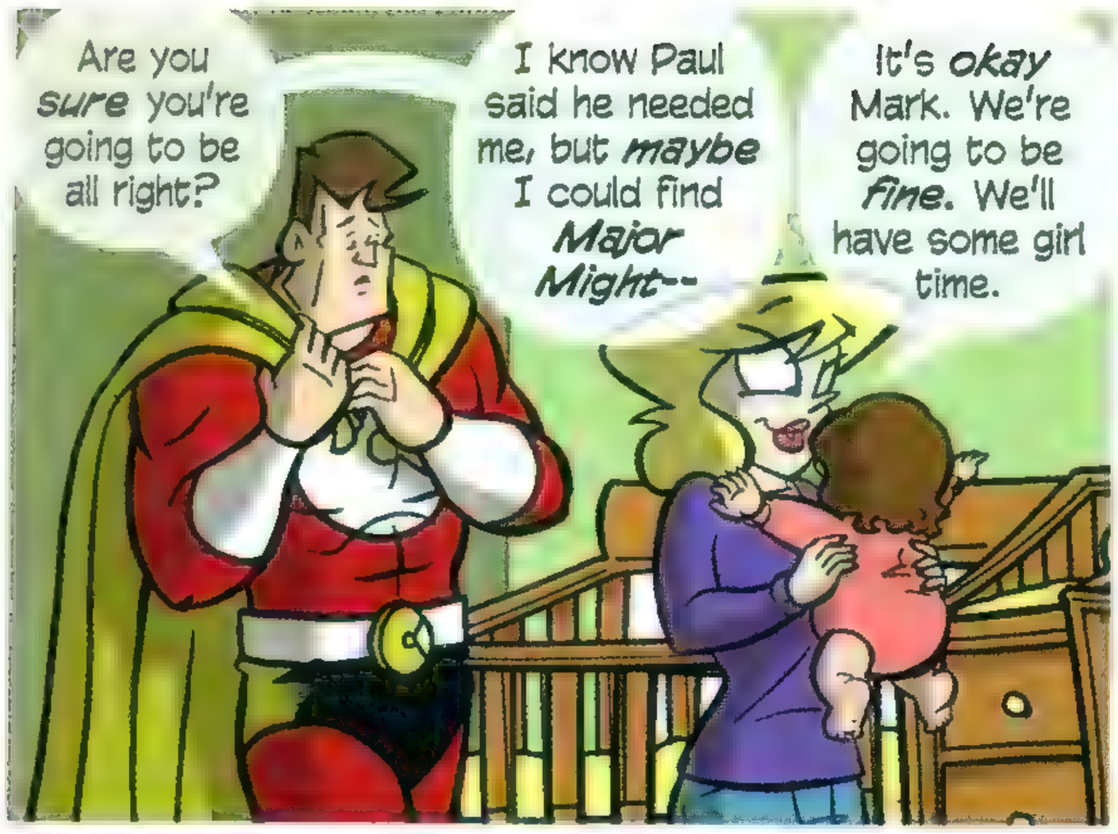

Is it just me, or does this feel kind of *right?*
Very right.

Do you *mind* sharing the fun?
Yes, but I will anyway.


Unless, of course, the *League* calls.
Yeah, I told--
Don't they *know* you're *busy* tonight?
BZZZ

Darkblade, what is--
--*now,* really? But I'm--
Sigh! On my way.

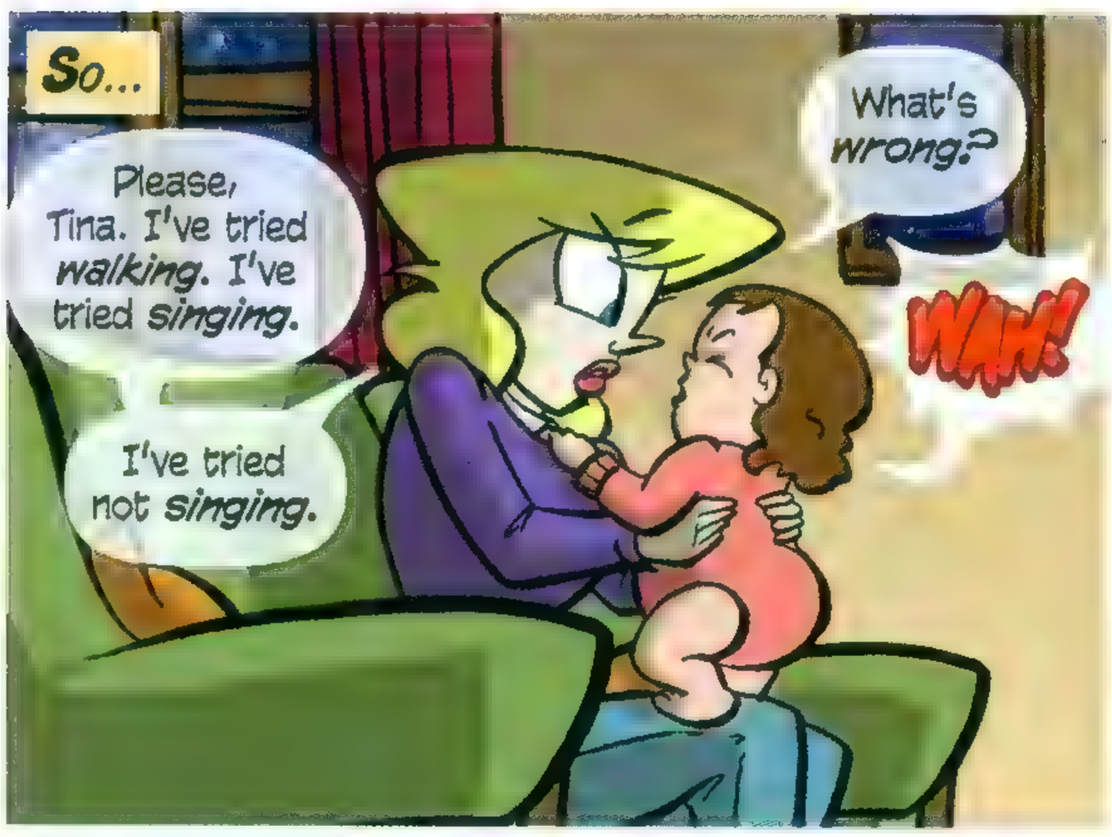
I'm guessing you caught the *gist* of that?
I have been hearing *that half* of the *conversation* for *years* now.


Are you *sure* you're going to be all right?
I know Paul said he needed me, but *maybe* I could find *Major Might*--
It's *okay* Mark. We're going to be *fine*. We'll have some girl time.

It looks pretty *clear* out there.
Still, I'm going to *whip* out of here, just to be safe
Get *ready*, Tina.

And *there he goes*.
See, we're going to be *fine*, right?
WOOOSH!

WHEEEEE!
You really do only have the *one trick*, don't you?


So...
Please, Tina. I've tried *walking*. I've tried *singing*.
I've tried not *singing*.
What's *wrong*?
WAH!

You're making me worried that my *maternal instincts* are *tone deaf*, you know?
I'm going to have to do this with your *cousin* soon. Help me out *just a little*?
Wuh-- *wuh*--

WAAAH!
So back to *walking* it is.

LIBERTY CITY...
Darkblade, what's the *emergency*?
Thank goodness you're here!
Zoe's credenza is *really* heavy.

You called me here to help you *move Zoe* into your place?
I called you here to help you with your *babysitting test.*

You *know* this is how it's going to work. A *crisis* will come up and you'll get *called away,* leaving Abby with the baby.

And you think it's *your place* to do this? Why didn't you just release *D-Block at Irongate* and do it right?

That's, um, *silly.* I *never* would have--
I told you it was a *bad idea.*

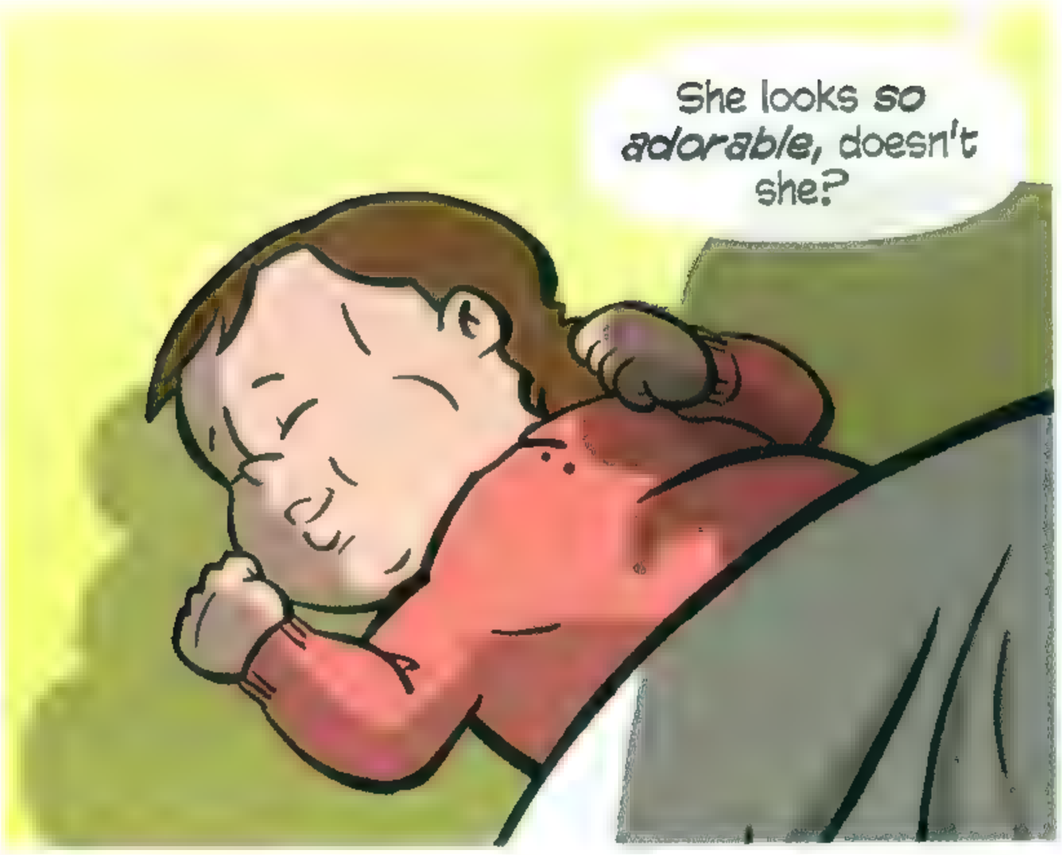
Paul, listen--
No, Mark, *you listen.* You're a *great* guy, and you're going to be a *great father.*
But you're occasionally going to be an *absentee father.* It's best you learn that now.

You don't understand! I *am* listening.
I can *hear* the baby *crying,* and Abby *can't* get her to quiet down.
She will for *me.* I--I--

--I hear her crying.
...
Fine.

The credenza you say?
I want to take the *statuary* of my family, too.
Of course you do.

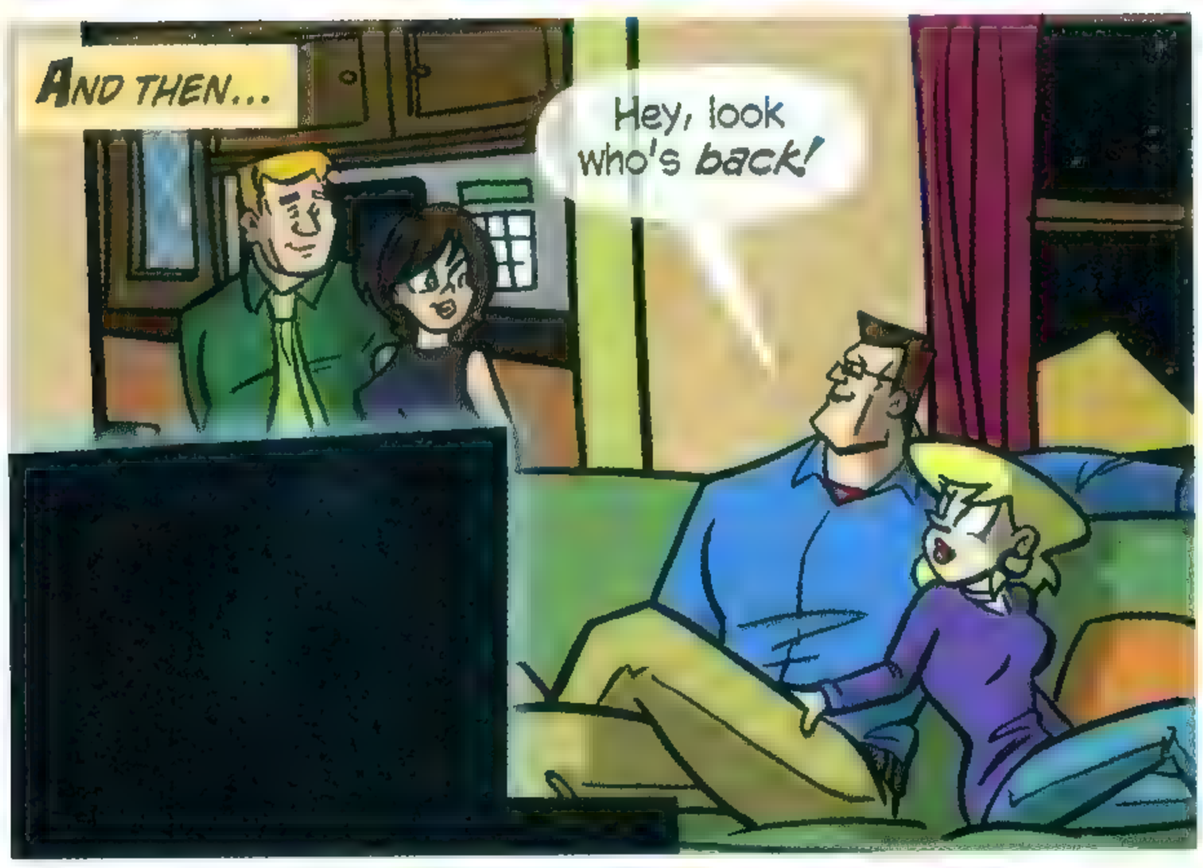
LATER...
Sounds like your Uncle Mark is *back*.
WHUMP!
And sounds like *someone* closed the *window* on him, too.
Remember, Tina, there's *always punishment*.
She's pretty *sound asleep*, but I appreciate your *discretion*.
Any problems?
I thought you'd have her in her *crib* by now.
We started off *rough*, but eventually we worked it out.
I was waiting for *you*. I figured you shouldn't miss *everything*.
Want to *take her?*
Sure.
Also, she's going to need to be *changed*.


She looks *so adorable*, doesn't she?

This babysitting run-through was a *great idea*, Abby.
Yeah, I have one every once in a while.

Just think, we'll have *one of these* in a *few months*.
You know, I'm glad we *still have* those months yet--

--I *can't wait*, either.


AND THEN...
Hey, look who's *back!*

How was the *little one?*
She was *wonderful*. We had a great time.
We just put her down half an hour ago, you want to *go see?*

Definitely.
So, how was the *movie?*

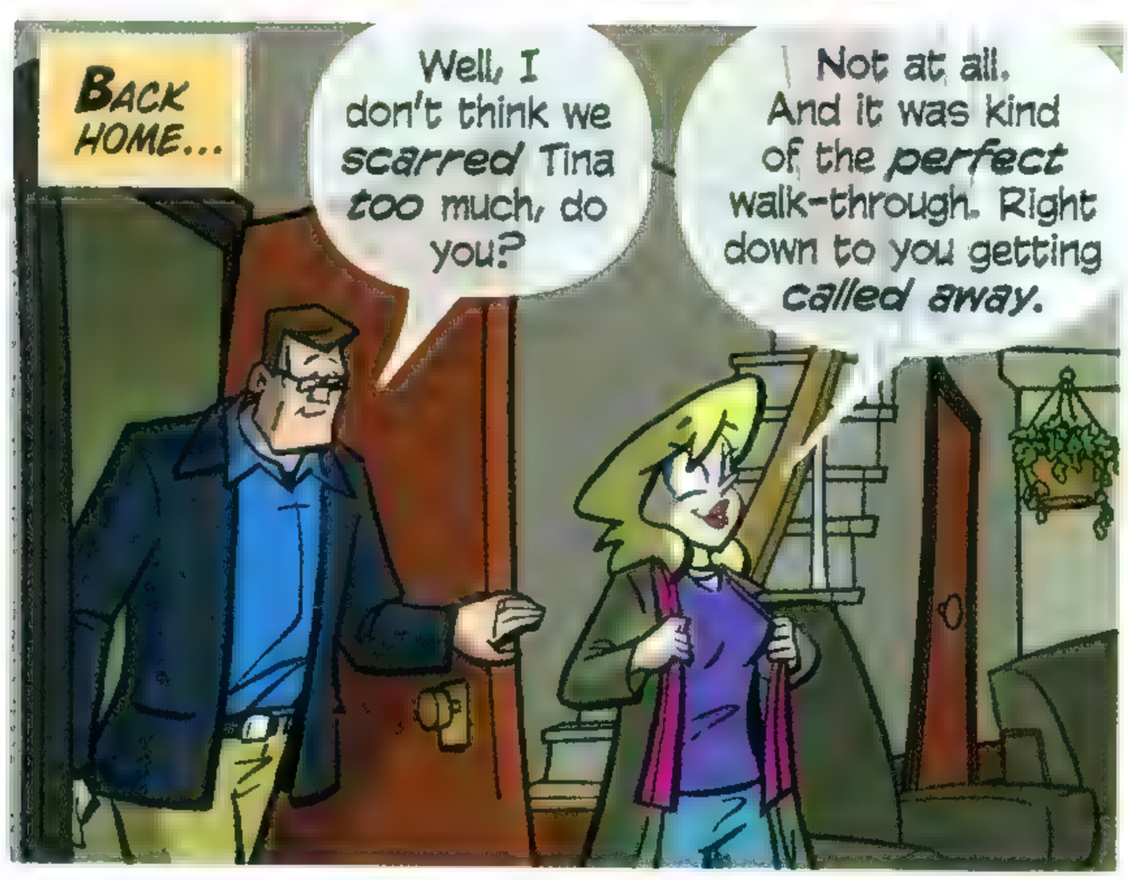
Well--
--it'll be out on DVD eventually.

THEN...
Call us again, anytime.
I may take you up on that. Did you get something out of it?

A lot. Even though we'll have one of our own soon, I'm a little jealous of you.
You're very lucky.

That's okay. We're a little jealous of you, too.
Really? Why?

You're going home to sleep through the night.

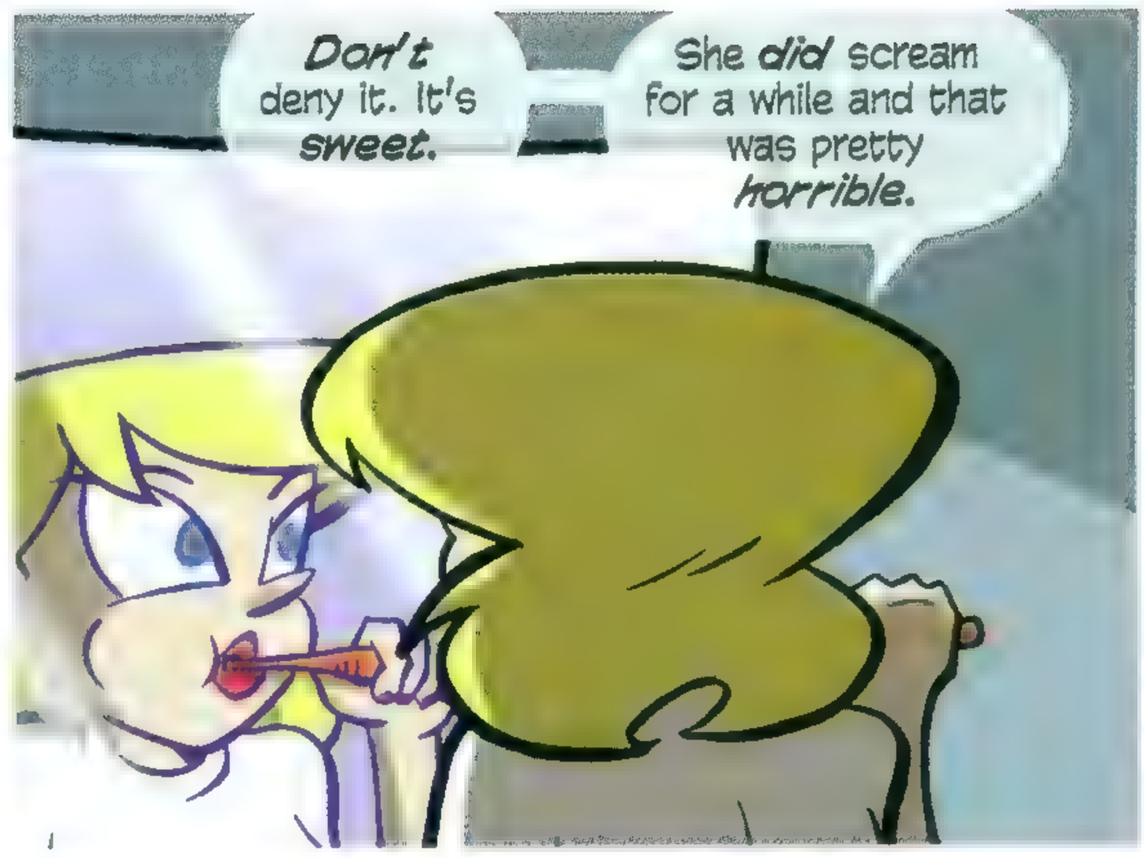

BACK HOME...
Well, I don't think we scarred Tina too much, do you?
Not at all. And it was kind of the perfect walk-through. Right down to you getting called away.

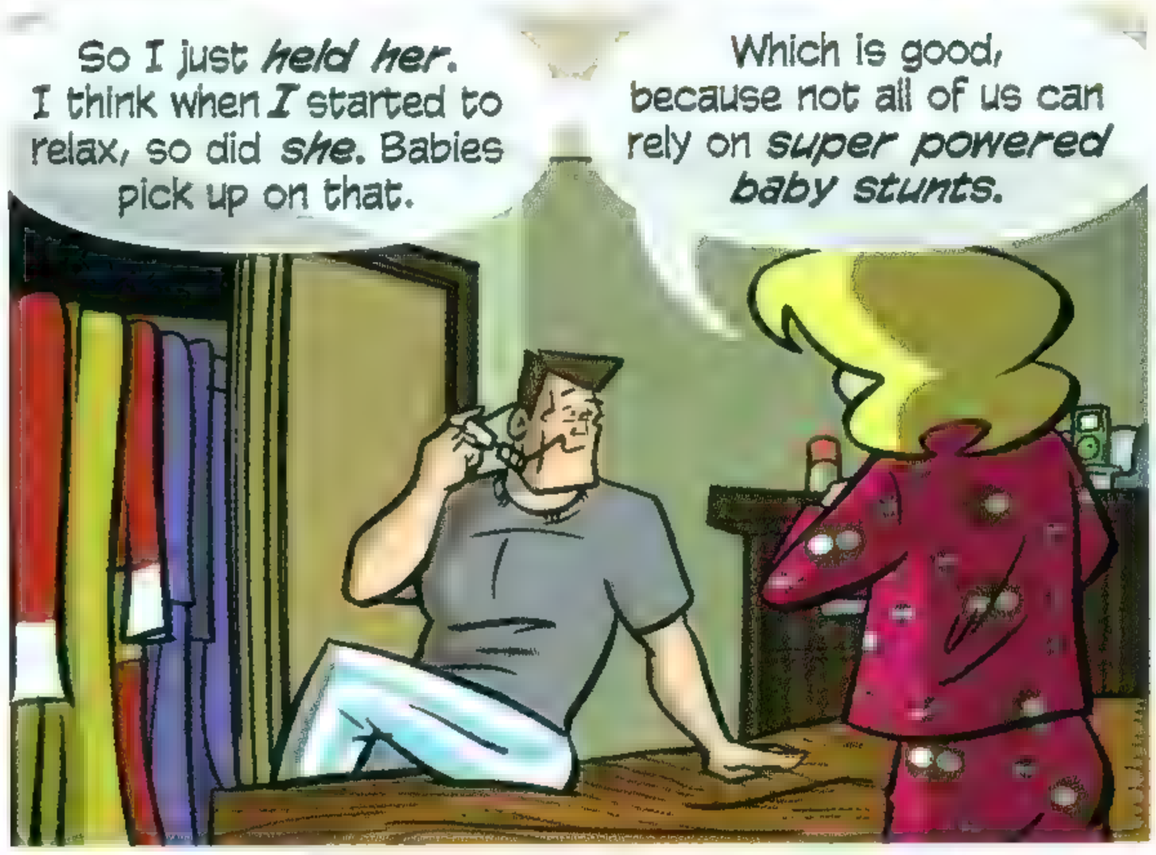
Say, that was a real thing, right?
I mean it wasn't just Paul pretending there was an emergency or something was it?

That'd be a little Machiavellian, even for Paul, don't you think?
Yeah, I suppose.

Good. I'd hate to have to kill him.
He'll be very relieved.

I was *impressed* to come back and find Tina quiet.
I was worried she would have gone all *inconsolable* on you.
Really? You weren't *listening in?*
Well--


Don't deny it. It's *sweet.*
She *did* scream for a while and that was pretty *horrible.*


So I just *held her.* I think when *I* started to relax, so did *she.* Babies pick up on that.
Which is good, because not all of us can rely on *super powered baby stunts.*

Well, you work with what you've got.
And we're going to work *just fine.*

Also, Olivia *did* make me realize how *unfair* our co-parenting will be.
What do you mean?

Well, *you* don't need anywhere *near* as much sleep as me--

--but *I'm* the one who's going to have to *get up* with the baby.

LATER...

--I'm *always* going to be getting up with the *world*.

31 WEEKS TO GO...

CHAPTER
3
3
4
5
JERRY ORDWAY

CHRONOPOLIS...
Well, that *infestation* took longer than I thought to get rid of.
And more people. Though the *British guy* with the *fez* was kind of cool.

Um, Mark, you've *still* got a little bit of *dead* on you.
Ick! I *really* hate zombies!

What is it with these *dimension-spanning crises* that seem to require an *army of heroes* to take care of?
Not a fan, *Paul?*

No. They just make me *cross. Over* and over again.

Oh, *hell.* Is that the *sunrise?*
Yeah. I know that as a creature of the *night* you don't see that a lot, but--

It's *not* that.
Zoe has an *all-week women's retreat* in Liberty City tomorrow, and I promised her I'd *try* to be back *before* she had to leave this morning.

Say, would you mind *dropping me off?* I have my *zip tunnels,* but you're still faster.
Sure! Let's go.

THEN...
Sorry. There's just *no manly way* to do this.
Just fly *faster.*

A MINUTE LATER...
Thanks for the lift.
Anytime.

Tell Abby I said *hello*. And I--

I-yi-yi--!
Hello, sweetie. Are you, ah, *upset?*

You're the detective. *Detect.*
Oh, hell.

I'm *starting* to wonder why I even moved in *at all!*
Now, Zoe--

I thought I'd actually get to see you *more* if we lived together.
Zoe, there was this *undead incursion*--
I *know* the job, Paul.

It's *always* going to be something. But it *can't* be *everything*.

You're right.
May I say something now?

Mmmmm...
ORY AND
ART BY THOM ZAHLER

That's a *very good point*, Mr. LaCroix.
Why, *thank you*.

Zoe, you're *smart*. And, honestly, I'm *brilliant*.
And *humble*.
Very true. And between the two of us, I *know* we can figure out how to make our schedules mesh.

We can talk more about this *after* your *retreat*. I'll make up for being *late* then.
You *bet* you will.

Oh, Mr. LaCroix, your kisses are so *dreamy*... swoon.
You do remember that you *work* for me, right? And that I can *fire* you and everything?

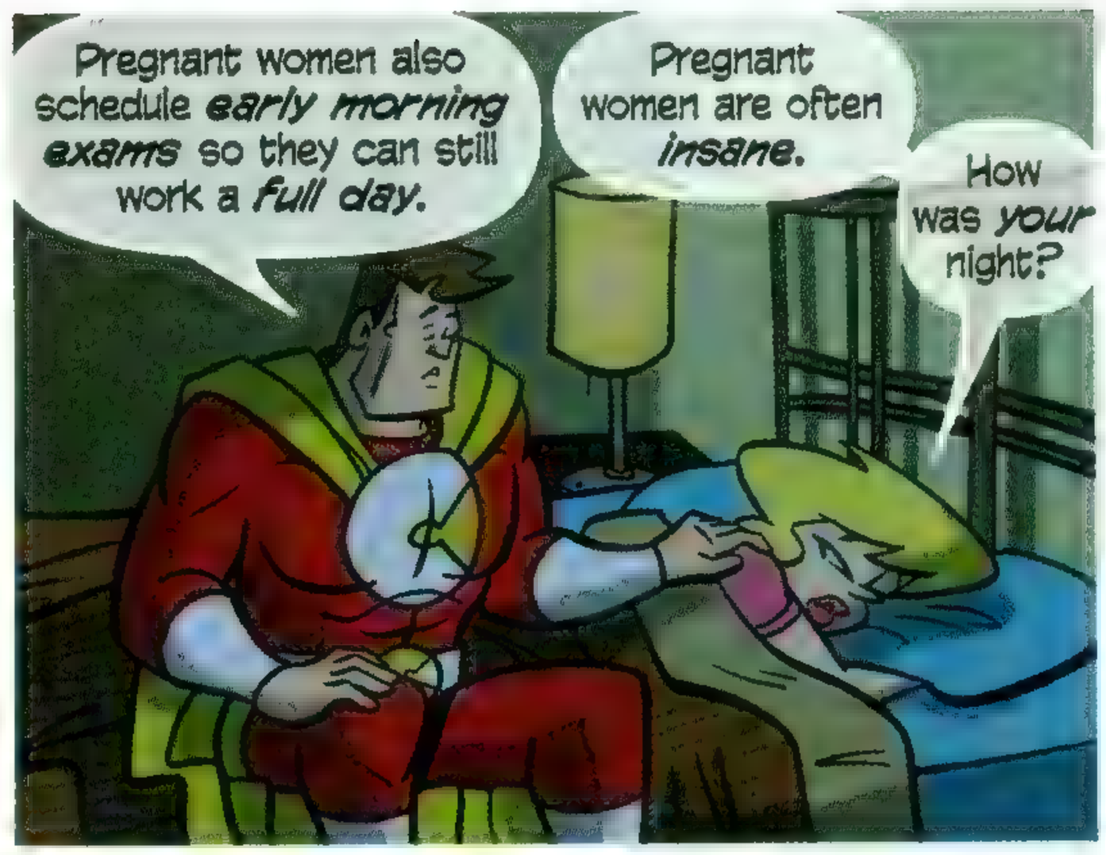
You know, there *is* a way to lighten your workload.
Oh, so you were *listening in*?
You have *microphones* built into your suit!

And if you were to--
Not *this* again. I'm *not* ready to take *that* step yet.
And just *when* will you be?

I'll let you know.
I wonder if *Mark* comes home to this kind of nagging?
Oh, I'm sure the Spencers' relationship is all *rainbows and unicorns*.

DECO CITY...
Abby, I'm home--
SNORE! SNORK SNORK! SNORRRRRRE!
26 WEEKS TO GO...

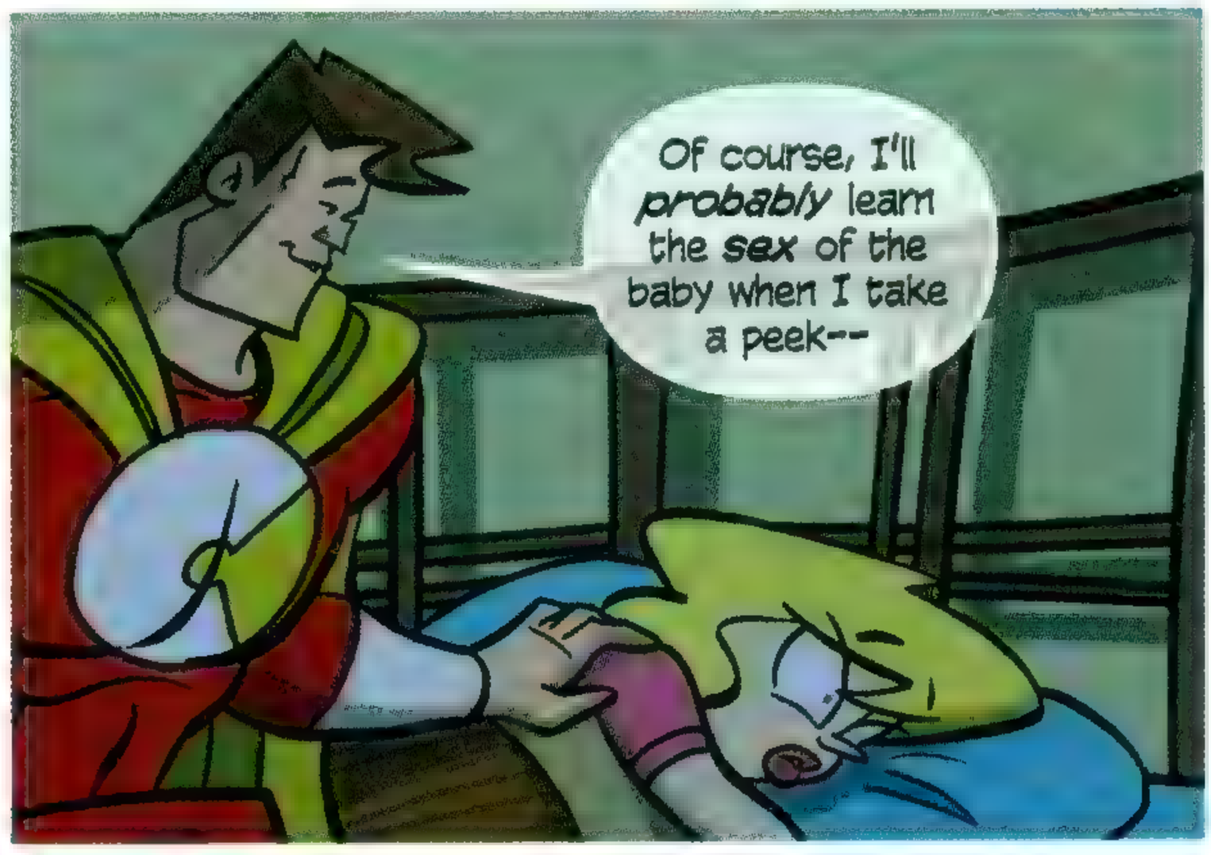
Abby, honey, it's time to *get up.*
Go away. I don' wanna get up. Pregnant women get tired.


Pregnant women also schedule *early morning exams* so they can still work a *full day.*
Pregnant women are often *insane.*
How was *your* night?

Kind of interesting, *actually.* Paul and I met this guy who actually had his timeline *rebooted* as we were--

Oh, *I* see what you're doing.
SNORE.

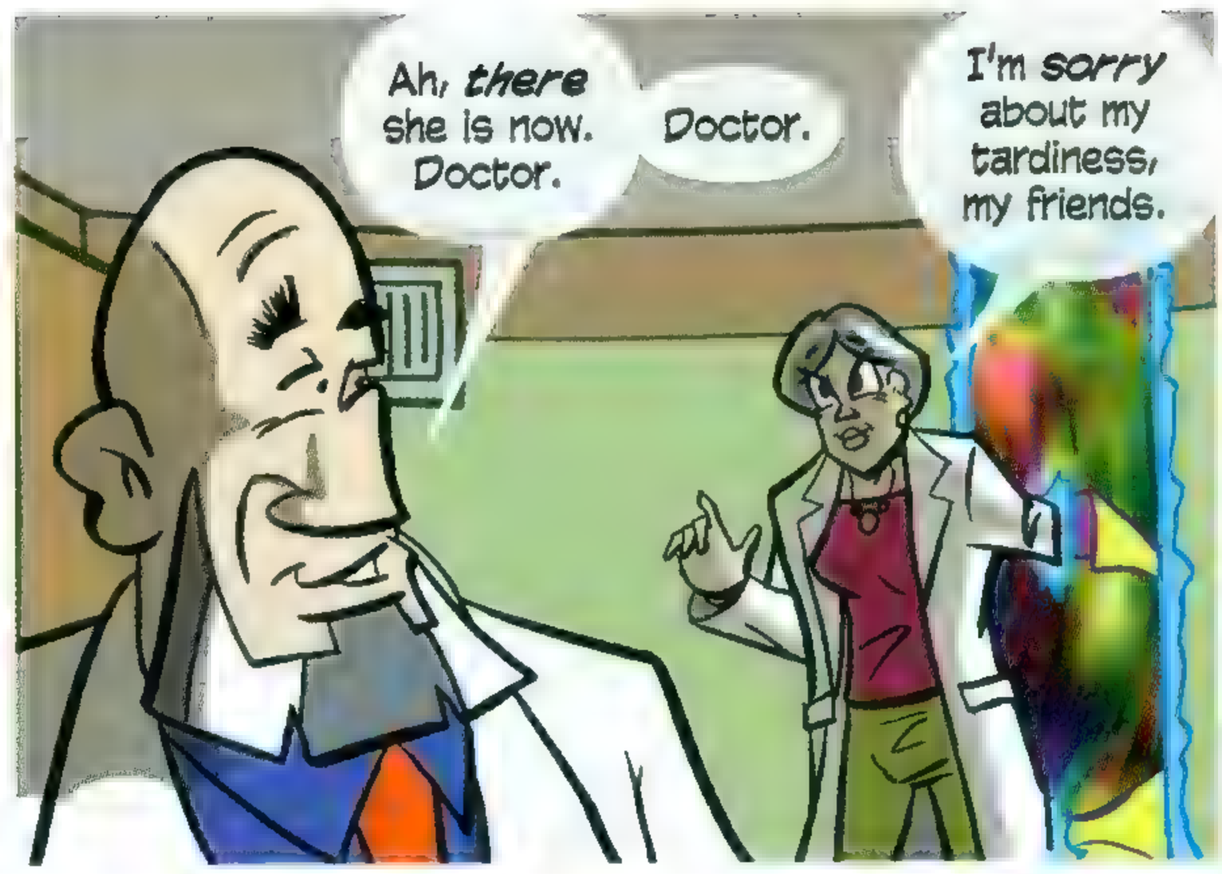
Abby, come on.
÷Sigh!÷ Maybe you're right. We *don't need to go.*
It's just the *ultrasound* today, and I can actually use my *super vision* for that.


Of course, I'll *probably* learn the *sex* of the baby when I take a peek--

NO PEEKING!
We agreed!

Um, you *know* this wouldn't *actually* stop me, right?

THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE...
I apologize. I have no idea where my alternate dimensional counterpart is.


Ah, there she is now. Doctor.
Doctor.
I'm sorry about my tardiness, my friends.

The dimensional bridges between our realities are ever shifting and complicated, and many beings are using them for many purposes.

So there was traffic?
Like rush hour in LA.

THEN...
--and you remember we don't want to know if it's a boy or girl.
I do indeed, Abby.

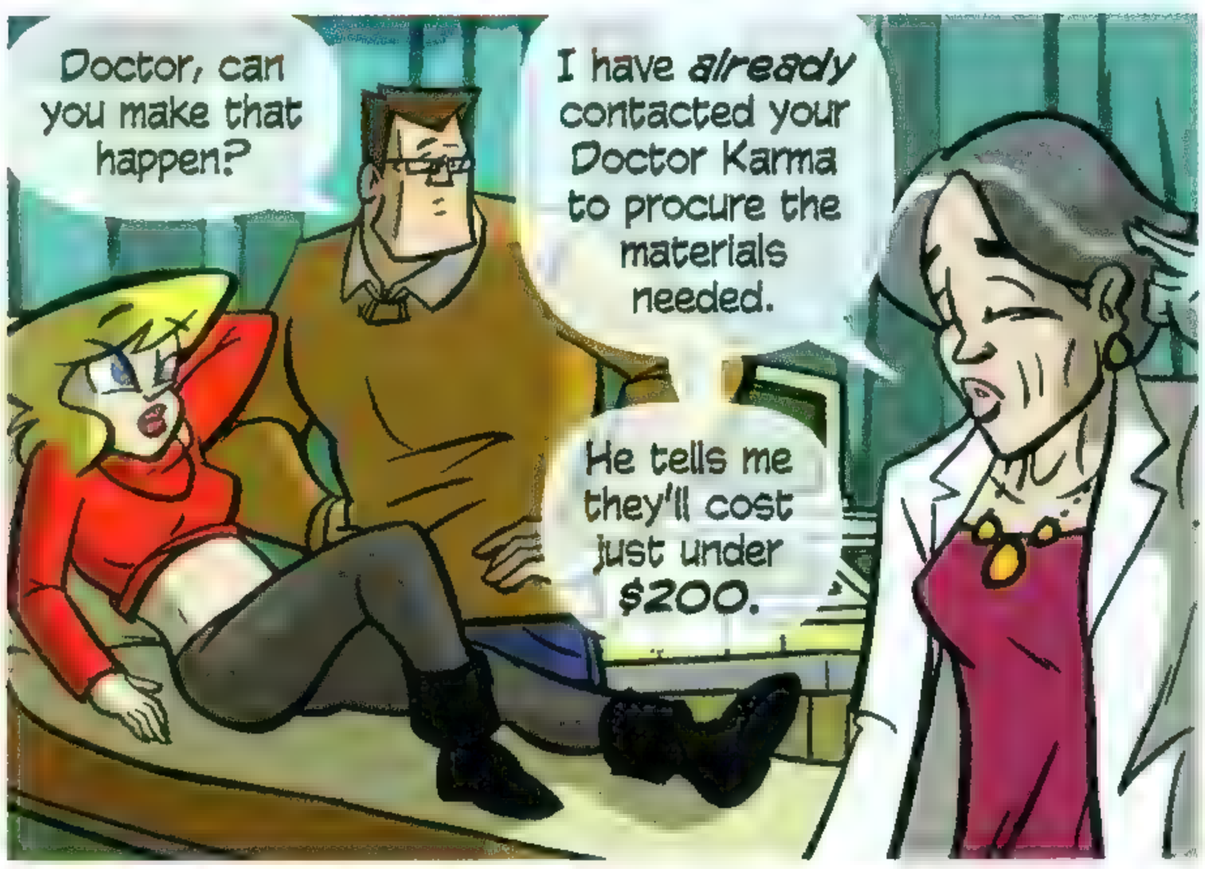
And can you cast some kind of spell to keep Mark from cheating and looking for himself?
Well, I can...

Abby, I'm offended. That was just a joke I made to get you up this morning. Have you hit that crazy ho--

As someone who can read both your minds, may I suggest that it would be unwise of you to finish that sentence?
Ulp! Got it.

Please, Mark, I *know* it has to be *tempting*. It would be for me. And I want us in this *together*.

It'd *really* make you feel *better*, wouldn't it?
Okay, *fine*.


Doctor, can you make that happen?
I have *already* contacted your Doctor Karma to procure the materials needed.
He tells me they'll cost just under $200.

Not covered by our *insurance*?
Not unless they have a *billing code* for *crushed dragon toenails*.
Be glad we buy in *bulk*.

And so...
Oooh, that's *cold*.
Apologies, Abby. Perhaps I could have had Mark *warm it up* beforehand.
Nope. This is a *no-powers zone*.

Very well, let's take a *look*, shall we?

Ah, *there* the little one is. The child looks good--and *strong*.
Let's find the *right angle* here...

Mark, Abby, I'm *pleased* to show you--

--your baby.

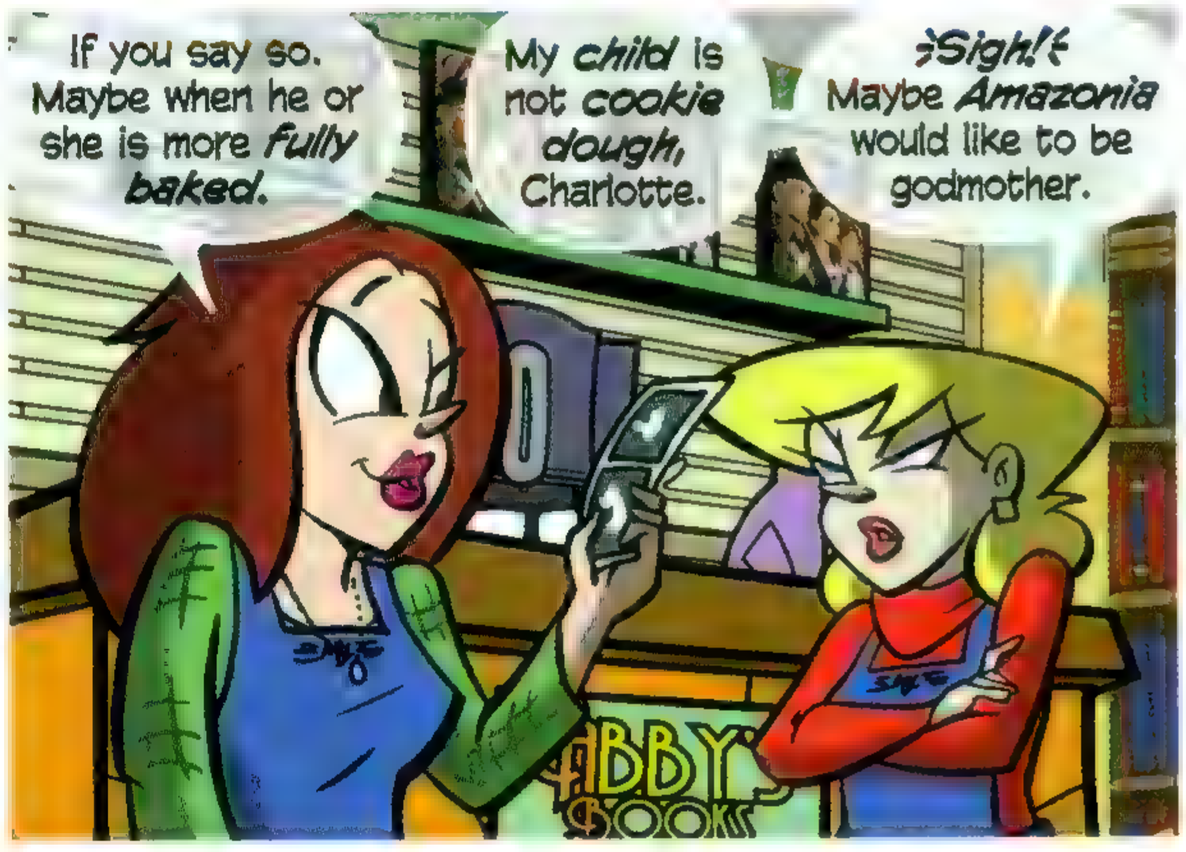
It's *our* baby.

Our baby.

LATER...
So this is the little one, huh?
Yes, it is, soon-to-be Aunt Charlotte.

Are you sure? It kind of looks more like the picture on Grandma's old TV.
That's your godchild you're talking about.
And you're holding it upside down.

I'm still not seeing it.
It?! Right there, that's his or her head.


If you say so. Maybe when he or she is more fully baked.
My child is not cookie dough, Charlotte.
¡Sigh!¿ Maybe Amazonia would like to be godmother.

THEN...
Excuse me. I couldn't help overhearing you. Did your sister say you were pregnant?

Yes, I am. Thirteen weeks now.
Oh, that's such great news!

You know, I've had three, and they're totally worth it. All of it.
The twenty hours in labor, the two C-sections, and all the stitches--

--the third had the cord around his neck and--
Do you think you're helping?!

THEN...
Yikes! I did *not* need that.
Did I hear you say you were *pregnant?* Congratulations!

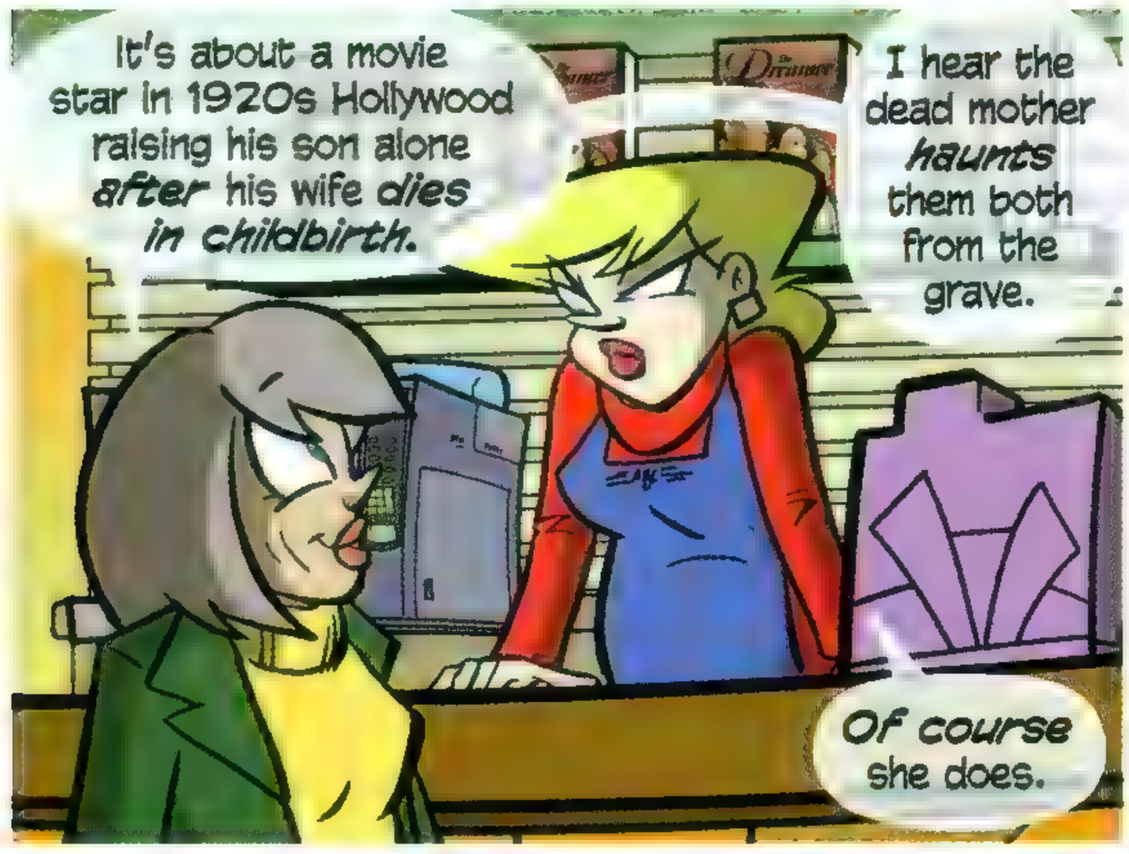
Pregnant and *nervous.* You don't have some *horrible* story do you?
Well, a *little.* I mean, I almost *died on the table,* but that worked out *okay.*

Almost died--?! *HOW?! How* did that work out *okay?*
First, I made it through.

And second, I have a *guilt card* to use on that kid for the rest of his life.

LATER STILL...
Just *this,* please.
Of course.

Oh, I *didn't realize* we had this in already. I loved his *last* book. What's *this* one about?


It's about a movie star in 1920s Hollywood raising his son alone *after* his wife *dies in childbirth.*
I hear the dead mother *haunts* them both from the grave.
Of course she does.

Charlotte--
Mango frozen yogurt with mochi *and* gummi bears?
Extra gummi bears.

CHRONOPOLIS...
--wait, so you're *not* going to find out the gender?
No, we thought it'd be fun to leave it a *surprise*.

Really? I *don't get that*. Seems to me mysteries are meant to be *solved*.

Now, *that* would be an *accomplishment*. To deduce what the *sex* of the child is.

Let's see, if you *conceived*--
DON'T YOU DARE!

LATER...
So Zoe and I are having some *scheduling conflicts*.
Her being *dayside* and you being *nightside*?

Exactly. And things just seem to be getting *busier*.
You know what you *need*--

Don't finish that sentence. You sound like Mrs. O.
That's because she's *right*. You need a--
Don't--

--*sidekick!*
We actually prefer to call them *interns*.

Having an intern *would* help me share the workload and free up a couple of nights.
But I'm just *not sure* I'm ready for one yet.

Haven't *all* the Darkblades had interns?
Training the next generation and all?
That's a *common misperception.*

In fact, *my predecessor* didn't have one.

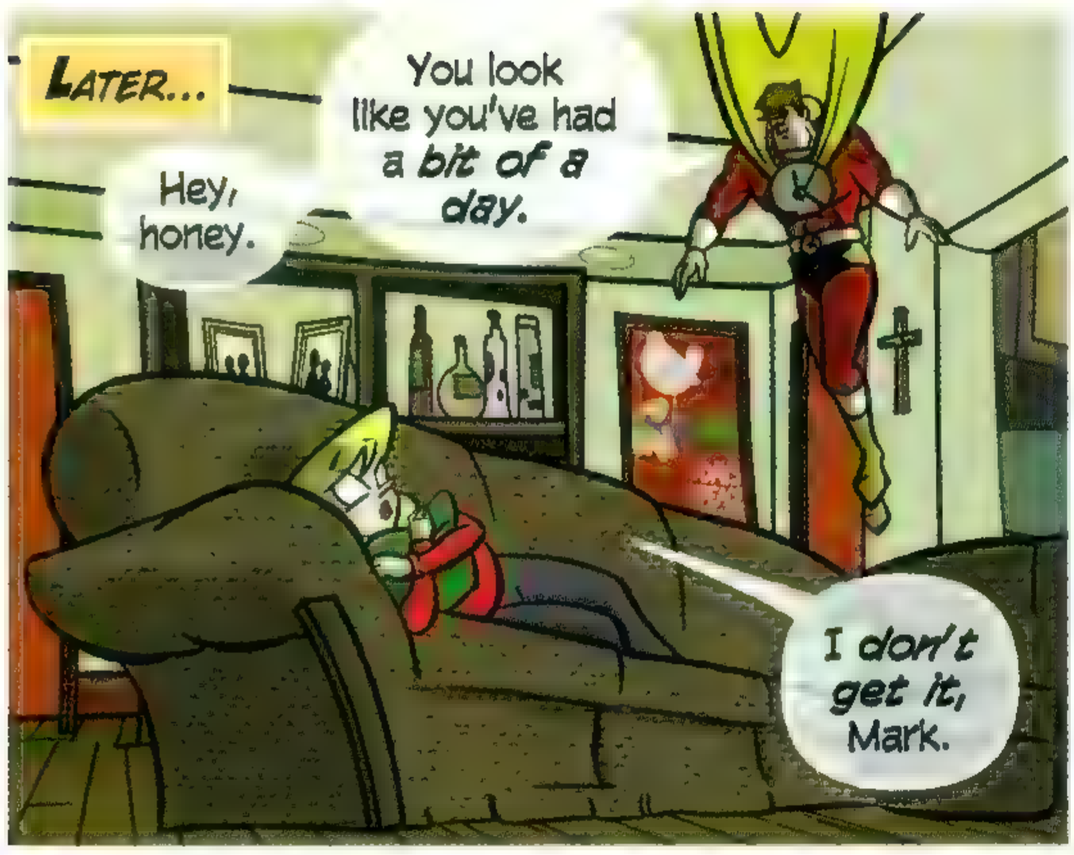
Paul, your predecessor died fighting Great Bear in his *first year* of being Darkblade.
And he *didn't have an intern.* My point *stands.*

THEN...
Paul, you've *known* taking a sidekick was part of the gig since you became Darkblade.
What's *really* bothering you?

An intern...Mark, it's an acknowledgment that time is *marching forward.* That I'm getting *older* and someday I *won't be Darkblade.*

I can stare down *villains* and *thieves* and *evil* without blinking, but my *own mortality* is a little tougher to deal with, you know?

Wow, you really do have *dark and broody* down to an *art,* don't you?
It's a *gift.*

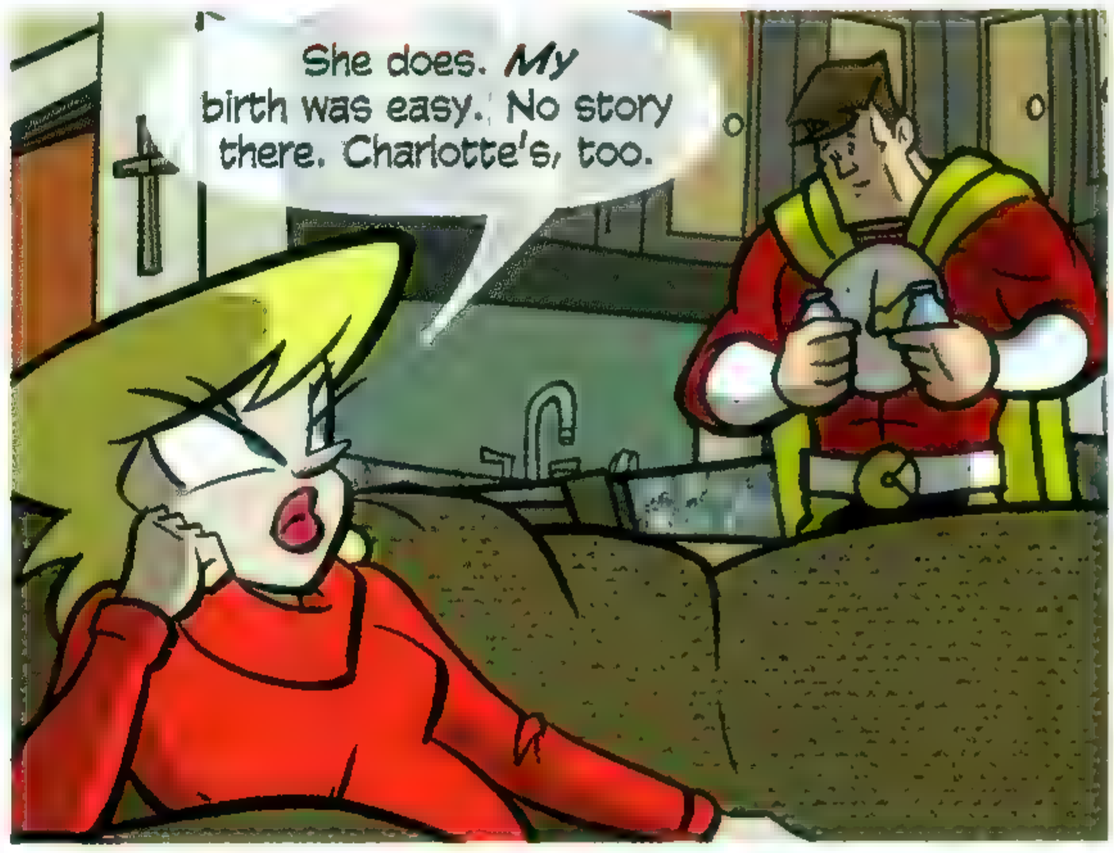

LATER...
Hey, honey.
You look like you've had a *bit of a day.*
I *don't get it,* Mark.

Why do women who have had kids feel the uncontrollable need to share with me Stephen King-level *horror stories* about what they went through?
Especially to a first-time mother?

I don't know. Maybe they're *sharing war stories.* Kind of a *female-bonding* thing.
You know, a "*welcome to the club,* newbie."

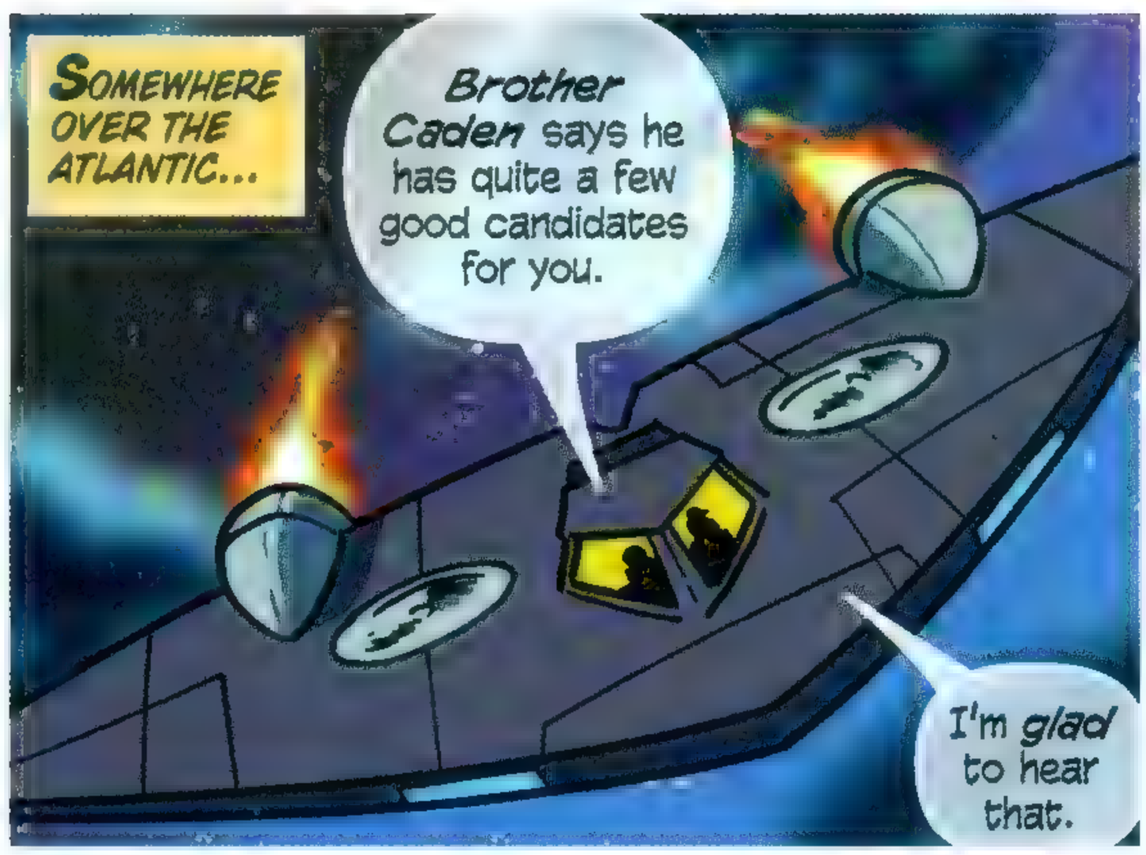
Well, then, they're doing it *wrong.*
So *very, very wrong.*

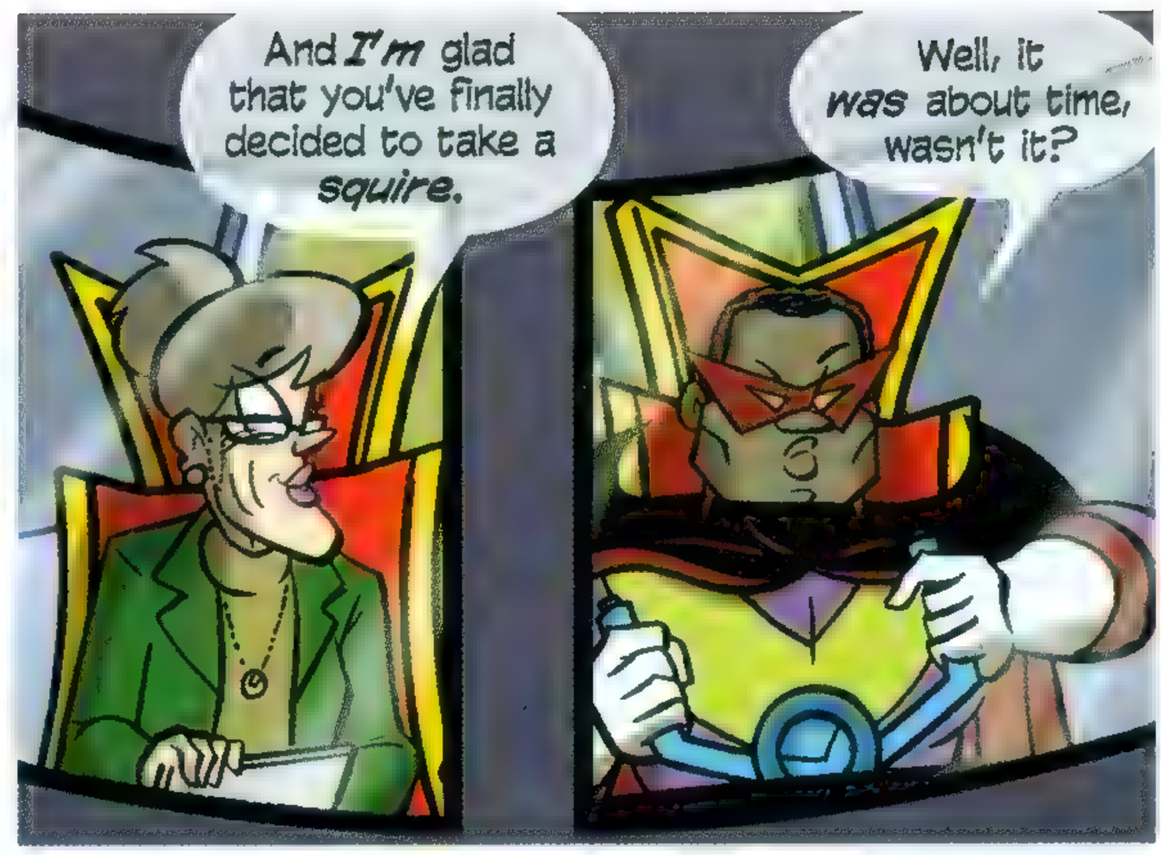
Could you grab me a *water,* Mark?
Sure.
Hey, have you talked to *your* mother? I bet she has some stories.


She does. *My* birth was easy. No story there. Charlotte's, too.

And *everyone* in my family knows the story of *Quincy's* birth *by heart.* My mom told it over and over.
Really?

Yes. And if this kid puts me through *32 hours* of labor and has an *unnaturally large head,* she'll know *her* story by heart, too.


SOMEWHERE OVER THE ATLANTIC...
Brother Caden says he has quite a few good candidates for you.
I'm glad to hear that.


And I'm glad that you've finally decided to take a squire.
Well, it was about time, wasn't it?

May I ask what finally changed your mind?
Amazonia. It seems silly to live with her and never get to see her.
Having another person to offload some of the work means that I get to have more time as Paul.

¡Harrumph! At least she's been good for something, I suppose.

SHORTLY, IN IRELAND...
We are glad to have you back at the monastery, Lord Darkblade. It has been too long.
It has indeed. But the mission does demand one's time.

The battle is neverending, isn't it?
Still, it is good that you have chosen to foster those who will be our next warriors for the cause.

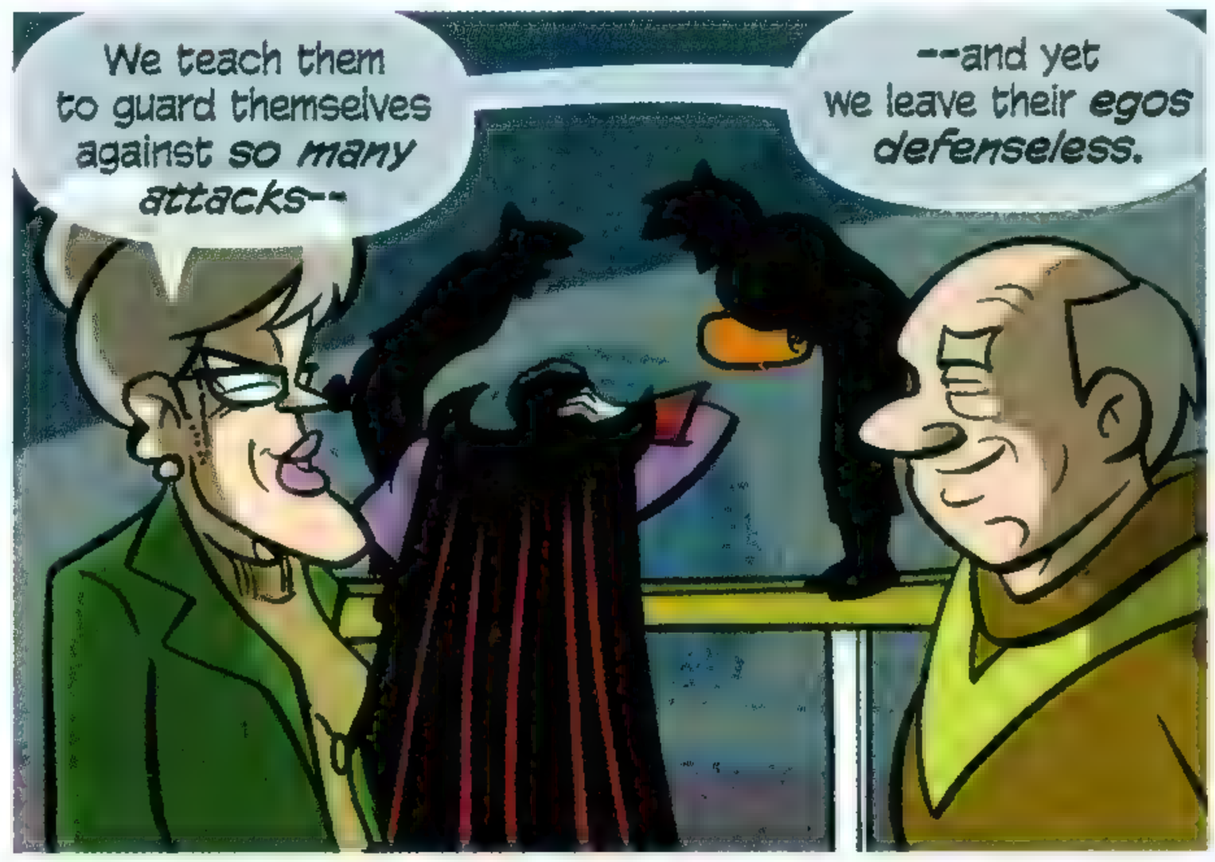
And I believe you will find that you shall learn as much from your charges as they shall learn from you.
Such was true for me when I trained you.
Really? What did you learn from me?

Mostly that I needed better locks on the girls' dormitory.

THEN...
Now this takes me back. The training room.
I've actually missed this place.

Whoa! Did you see that?
Indeed, Master Timothy is one of our most promising students.

Why, he managed to break your record on The Gauntlet.
My... record?

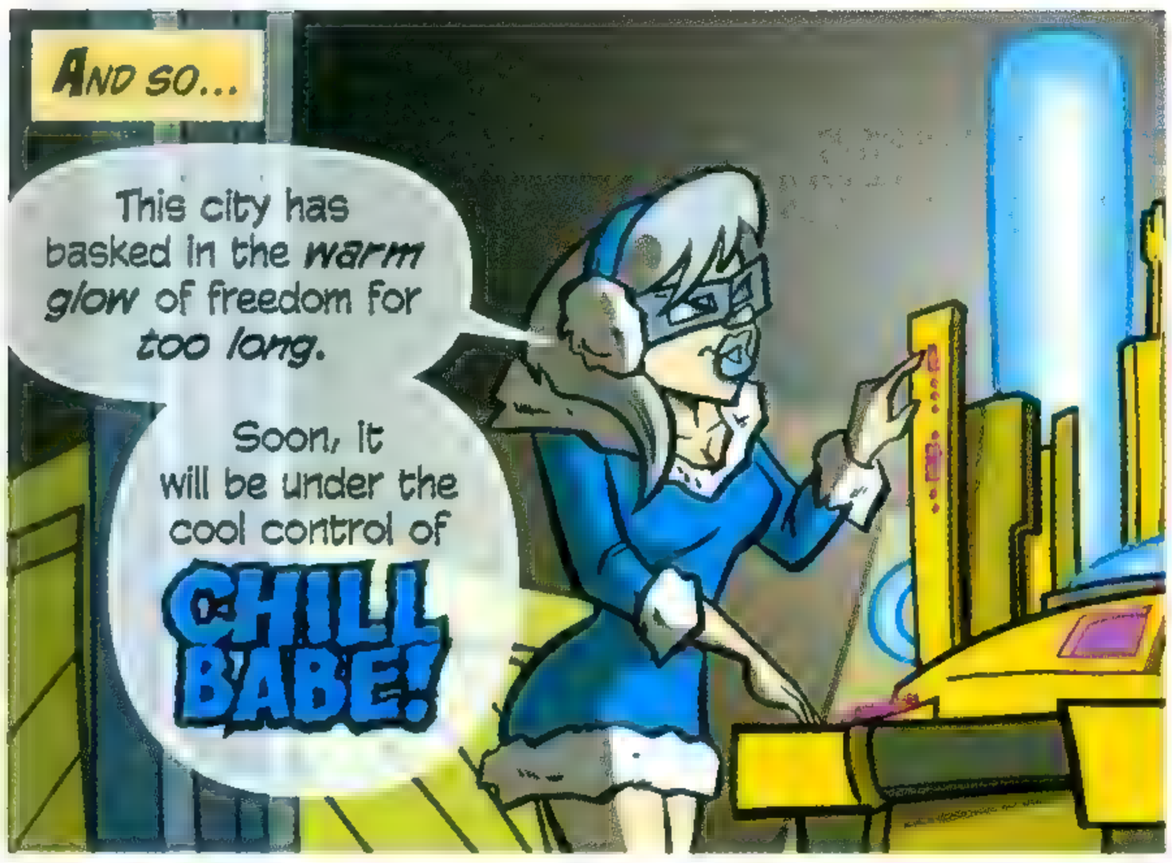

We teach them to guard themselves against so many attacks--
--and yet we leave their egos defenseless.

FINALLY...
Grant, Timothy, Misty...good to meet you.
Brother Caden says you three are his best students. We can't decide between you, so we've decided to give you all the opportunity.

The three of you will come to Chronopolis to apprentice and train with me.
After six months, we will decide which one of you will earn the role permanently.

Some of you chose this path. Some of you had this path chosen for you, as I did. It is my hope that you will find it as rewarding as I have.

Now let's review your files and--
--oh, hey, I loved you in "Mean Girls."
Thank you, sir.


AND SO...
This city has basked in the warm glow of freedom for too long.
Soon, it will be under the cool control of CHILL BABE!

Not so fast. First you're going to have to deal with Darkblade--
--and Crusader!

And Dart!

Yeah, you see, sidekicks don't really get billing.
Whoops. Sorry.

LATER...
Whose night is it tonight?
Dagger's.
So where is he?

I tasked him with an important mission.
He must be doing well if you're letting him solo already.

Darkblade, sir, here's your coffee.
Thank you, Dagger.

Wait! What is this? Is this low-fat?
Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

THEN...
Hey Darkblade... Dynamite. How are things going tonight?
Pretty quiet. In fact, I was just going to give the kid the night off.

I'll have that report on unarmed combat techniques for you when you get back, sir.
Sounds good.

He seems pretty sharp.
He is. I'm not sure he's going to work, though.

It's not just because he's taller than you, is it?
No! Well, it's just...
...I need to be imposing, you know?

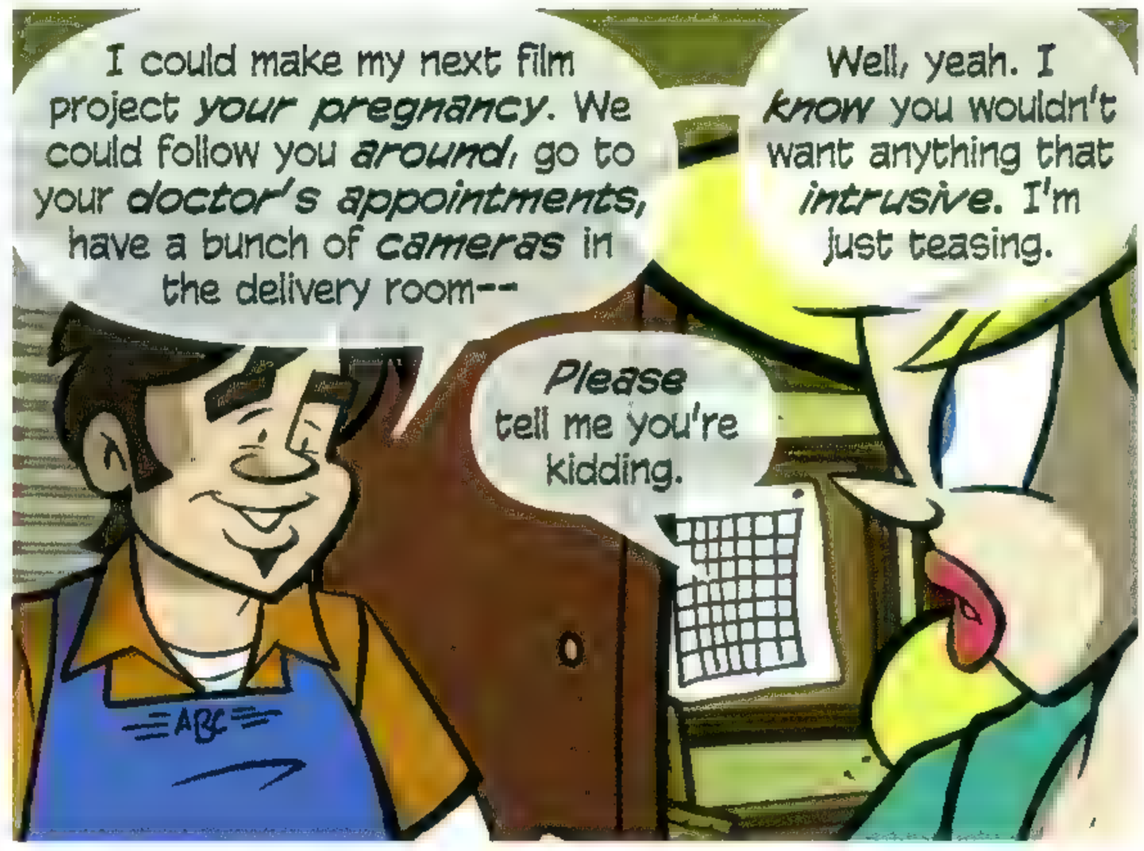
LATER...
Ouch!
Have you started hitting harder?

I'm going to hit you even harder still if you don't tell me where that bomb is.
Gah-- look--

--you'll have to ask my partner.
You have a partner, Silverfish?

Oh, no you don't!
So do I.
I think I'm going to get used to this sidekick thing.

ELSEWHERE...
Hey, Abby, I just had a *great idea!*
What is it?

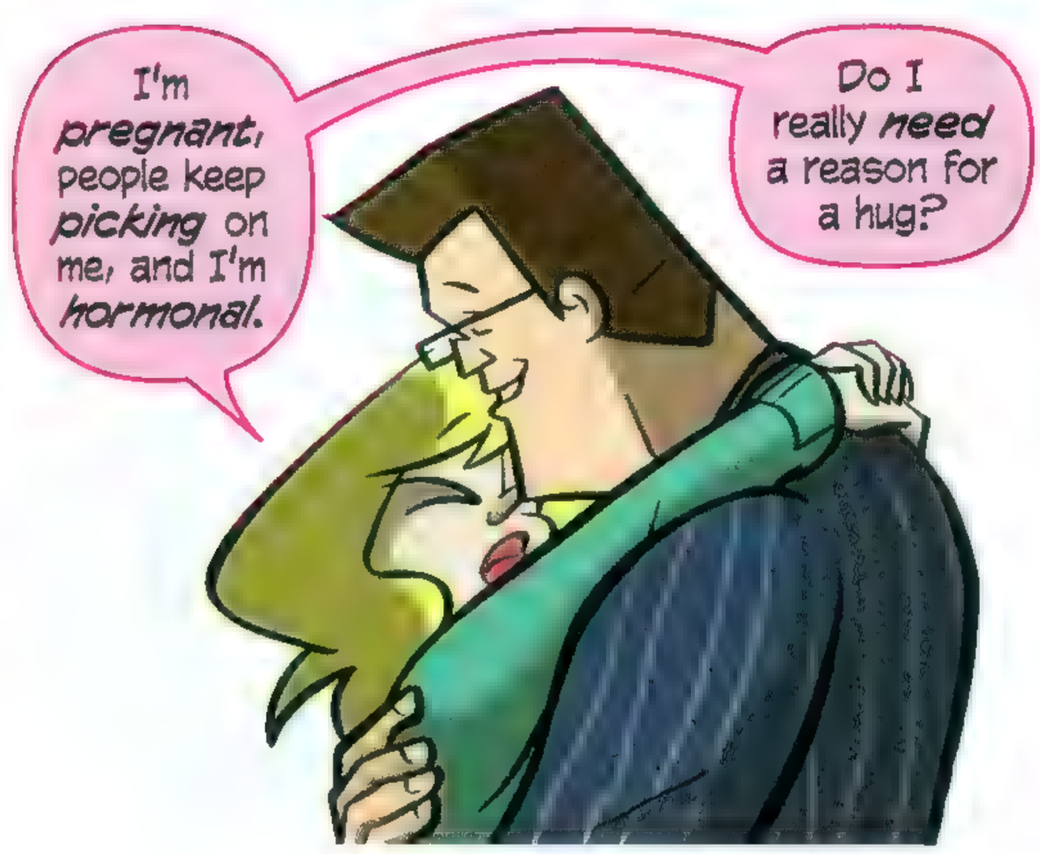

I could make my next film project *your pregnancy*. We could follow you *around*, go to your *doctor's appointments*, have a bunch of *cameras* in the delivery room--
Well, yeah. I *know* you wouldn't want anything that *intrusive*. I'm just teasing.
Please tell me you're kidding.

So, you think messing with the *pregnant woman* is a *wise idea?* Kind of like *poking a bear* in its cave, isn't it?
EXIT

You know, I'm just going to back up *slowly*.
Try raising your *hands* above your head and looking as *big* as you can, too.

LATER...
Mark, are you *home?*
Yeah, I'm here. *What's up?*

I need a *hug*.
What happened?


I'm *pregnant*, people keep *picking* on me, and I'm *hormonal*.
Do I really *need* a reason for a hug?

No.
No, you *don't*.

You know, my *new worry* is the trip to the *hospital.*
What are you worried about *there?* I'm going to *fly* you.

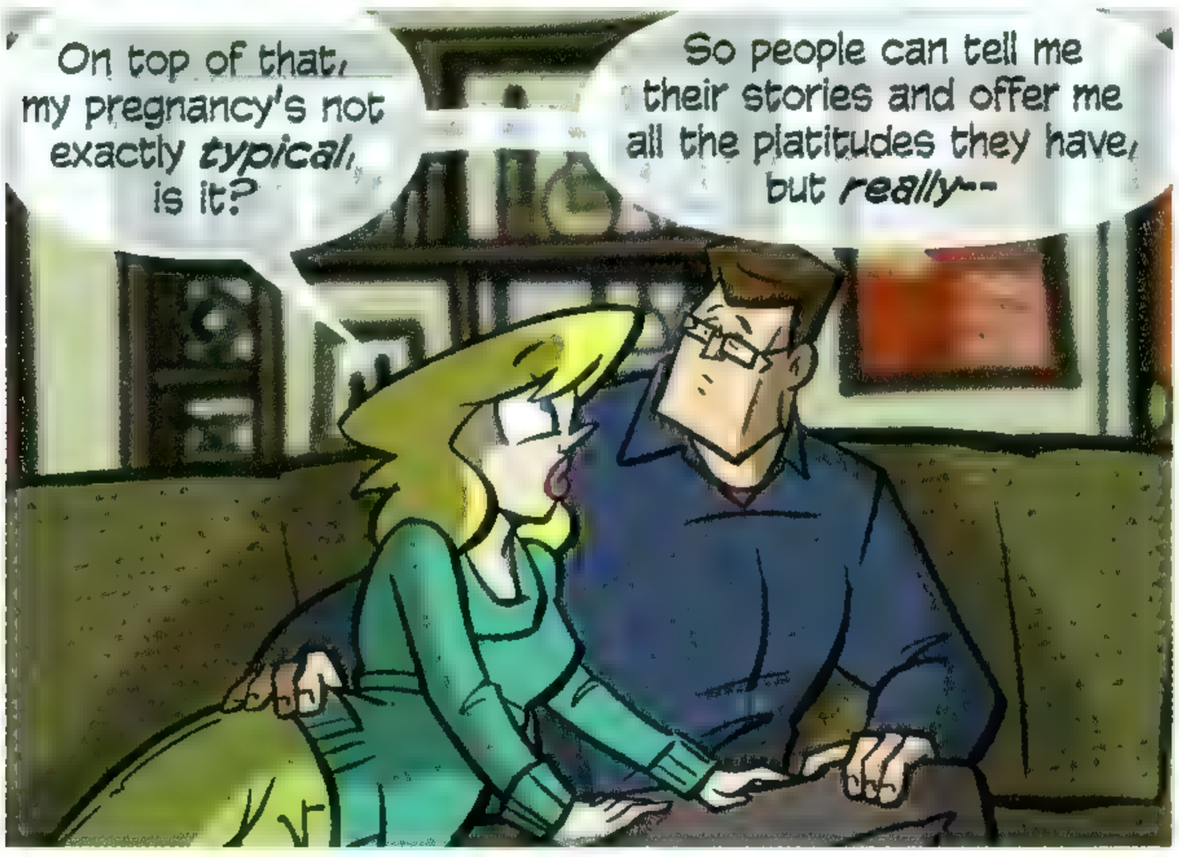
But what if you're catching some *falling plane* or stopping someone's evil plan?
Do I call my *parents?* *Quincy?*
Do I call an *ambulance?*

Honey, don't forget *whose* wife you are.
You call the *Liberty League.*

And if you're all *off-world,* competing in some alien gambler's private *games?*
Once! That happened *once!*

Every time I deal with one worry, a *new one* pops into my head.
Abby, everything's going to be fi--

Mark, *you* say that... *everyone* says that...but you don't *really know,* do you?


On top of that, my pregnancy's not exactly *typical,* is it?
So people can tell me their stories and offer me all the platitudes they have, but *really*--

--*no one* knows exactly what *I'm* going through.

THE NEXT NIGHT...
Ugh! I am not going to be a fan of these stairs in a couple of months.

And I--Mrs. Spencer?
Oh, hello, Abby.

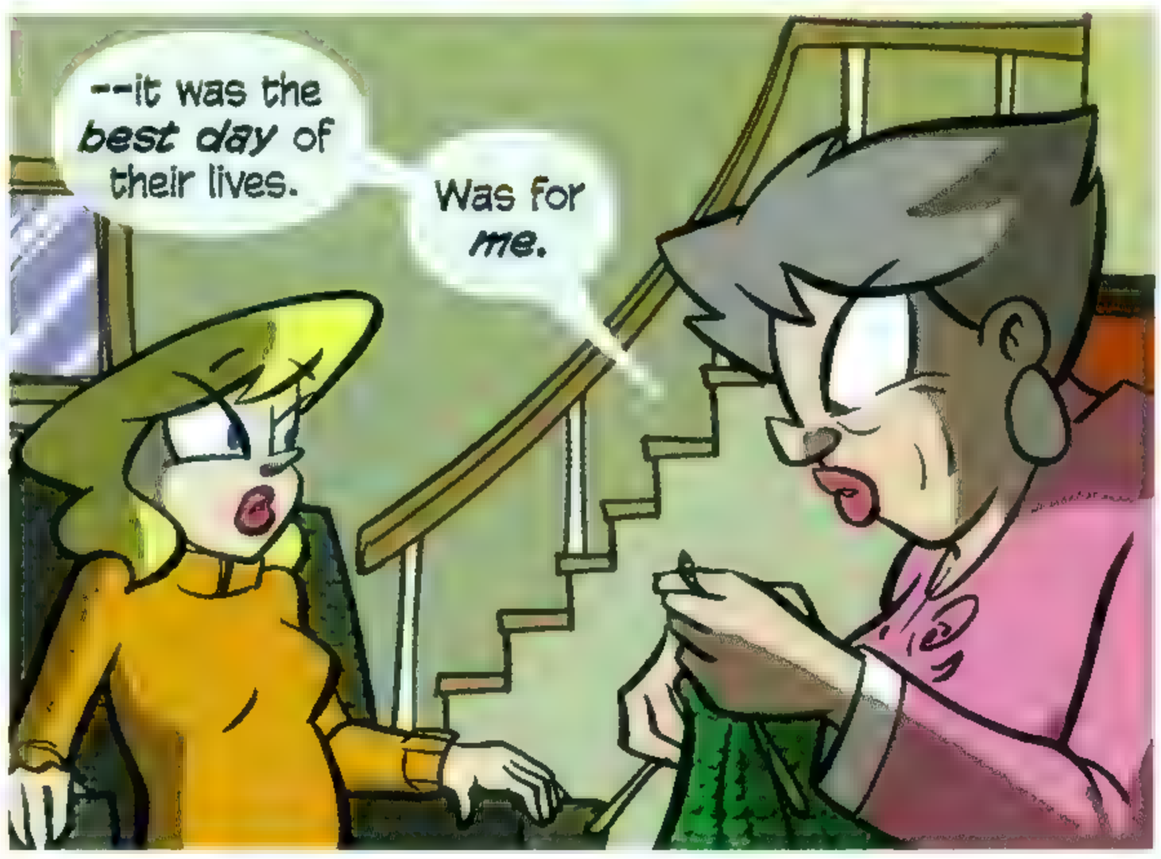
It's always good to see you, Mom, but why--
Why am I here?
Mark and I were on the phone and I mentioned that cheescake place you took us to and he said "Hey, you want to go?" and he picked me up.

Let me guess...you two got here and he cocked his head with that faraway look and he said "Uh-oh!"
Left me with a Mark-shaped cloud of dust.

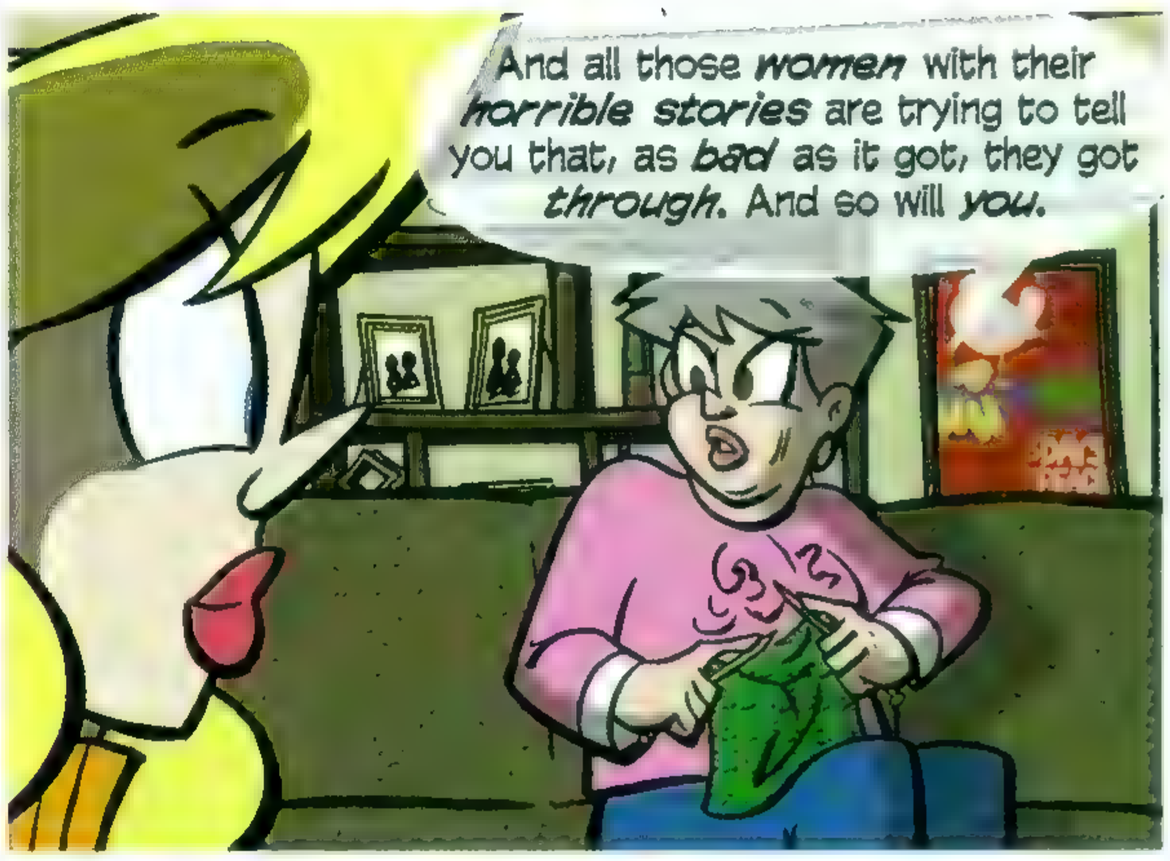
Oh, man, am I tired! When does this part go away?
In my experience, as soon as they leave for college.

You wouldn't believe the number of mothers that came in and performed Scary Pregnancy Theatre today.
I actually talked to someone who really was trapped in an elevator.
Imagine that.

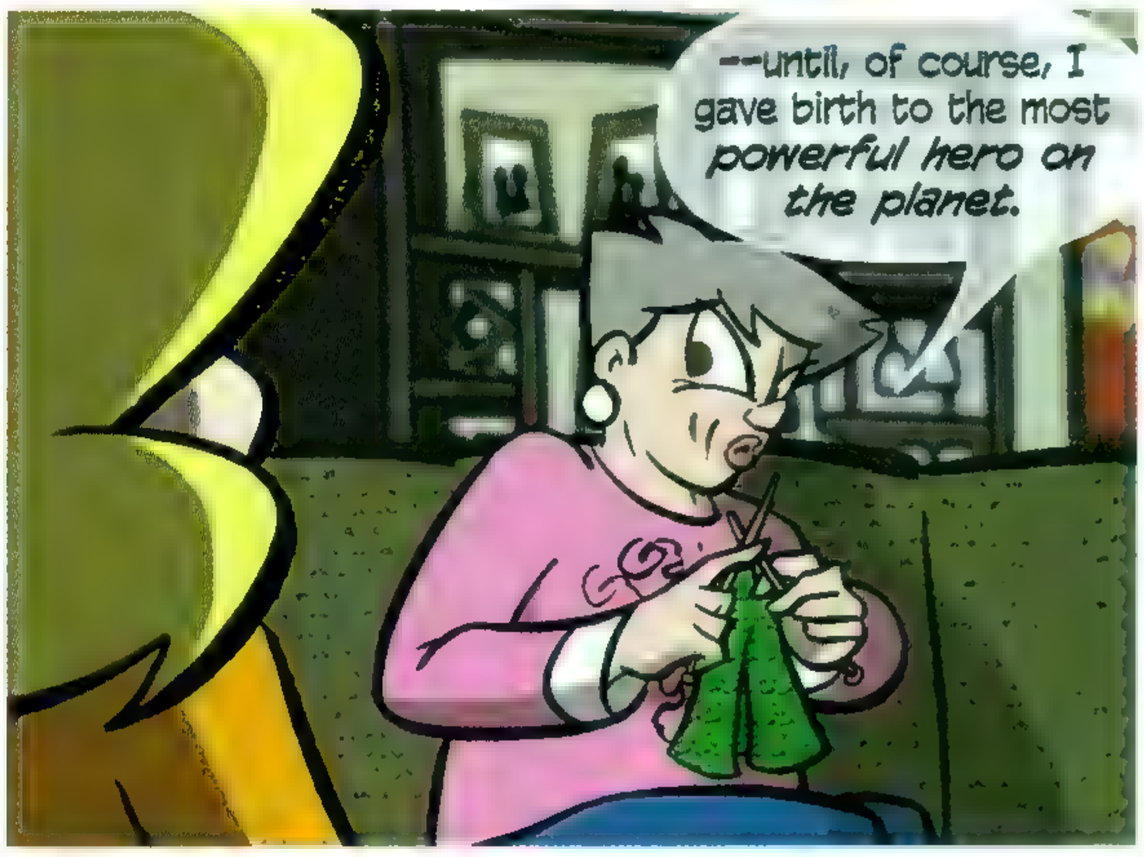
I don't get it. It's like they can't wait to share every detail of their tales of terror.
Well, of course, Abby--

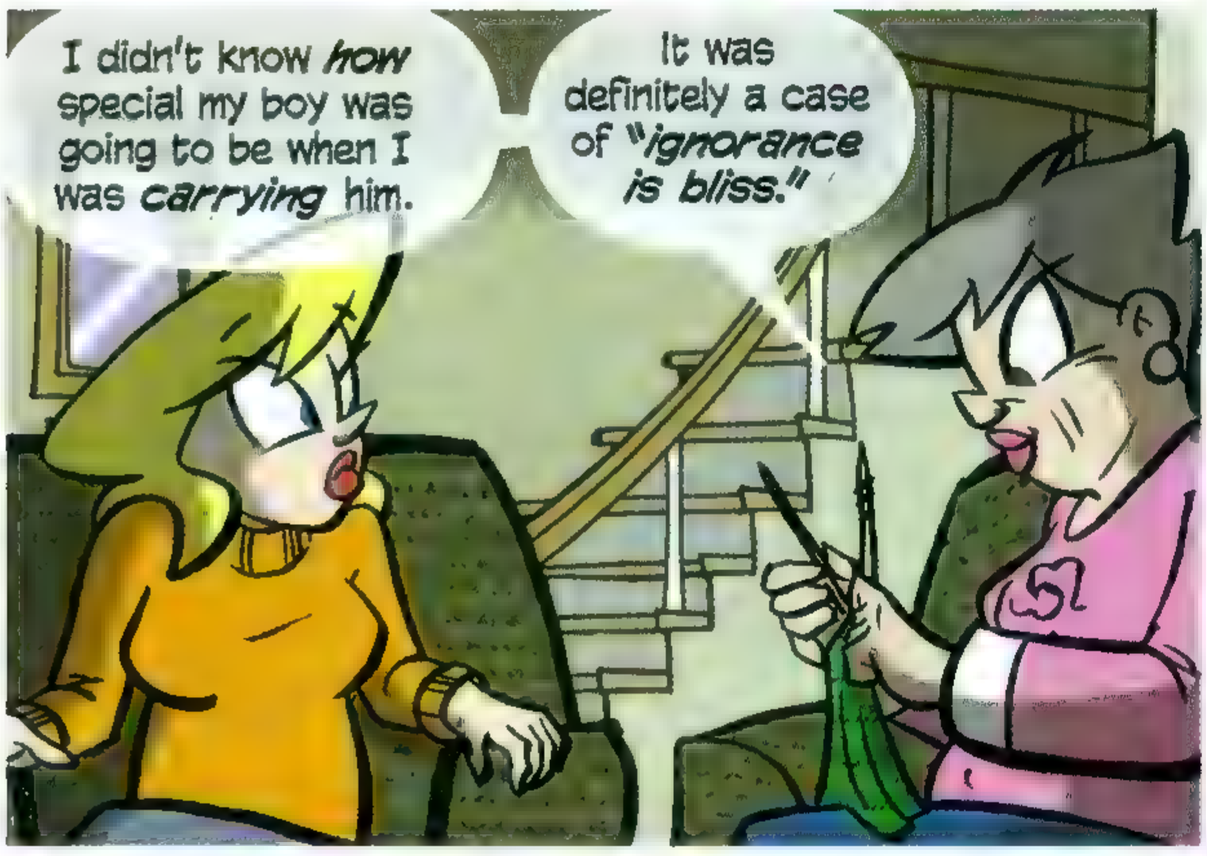

--it was the best day of their lives.
Was for me.

It's okay to be worried.
In fact, you should get used to it.
You're going to be a mother. It comes with the job.


And all those women with their horrible stories are trying to tell you that, as bad as it got, they got through. And so will you.

As for me, aside from a constant craving for fish sticks, my pregnancy was pretty uneventful--

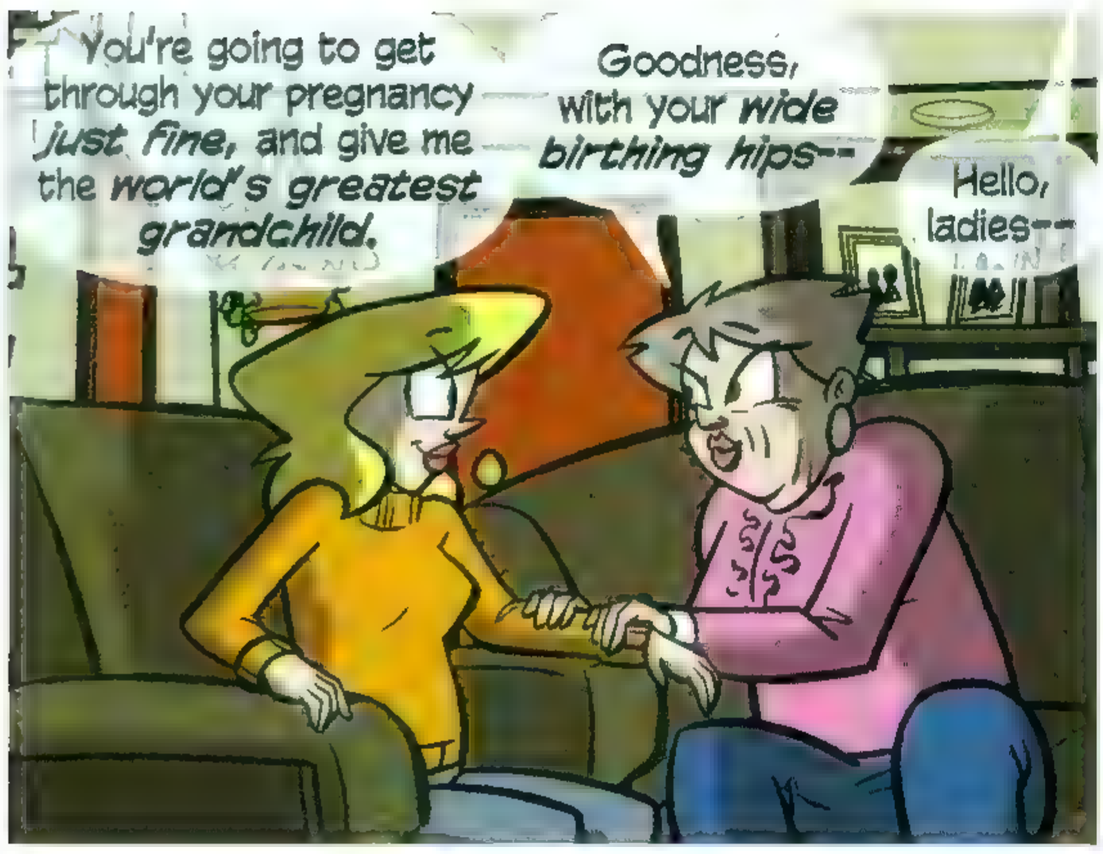

--until, of course, I gave birth to the most powerful hero on the planet.


I didn't know how special my boy was going to be when I was carrying him.
It was definitely a case of "ignorance is bliss."

We didn't have all those studies about vitamins, mercury in your fish, and caffeine.
Heck, I drank a cup of coffee every morning with Mark--which clearly stunted his growth.

And I certainly didn't have access to two Doctor Karmas, a genius, and a satellite full of science-fiction gadgets.
None of that will stop you from worrying, but maybe it'll take some of the edge off.

You were doing great until you mentioned the coffee.
Ouch. Sorry about that.


You're going to get through your pregnancy just fine, and give me the world's greatest grandchild.
Goodness, with your wide birthing hips--
Hello, ladies--

Hello, Mark.
Mom, are you still up for cheesecake, or should I get you home?
Please. There's always time for cheesecake.

Let me just freshen up and I'll be ready.
So, Mr. Convenient Disappearance, was there really an emergency at all?

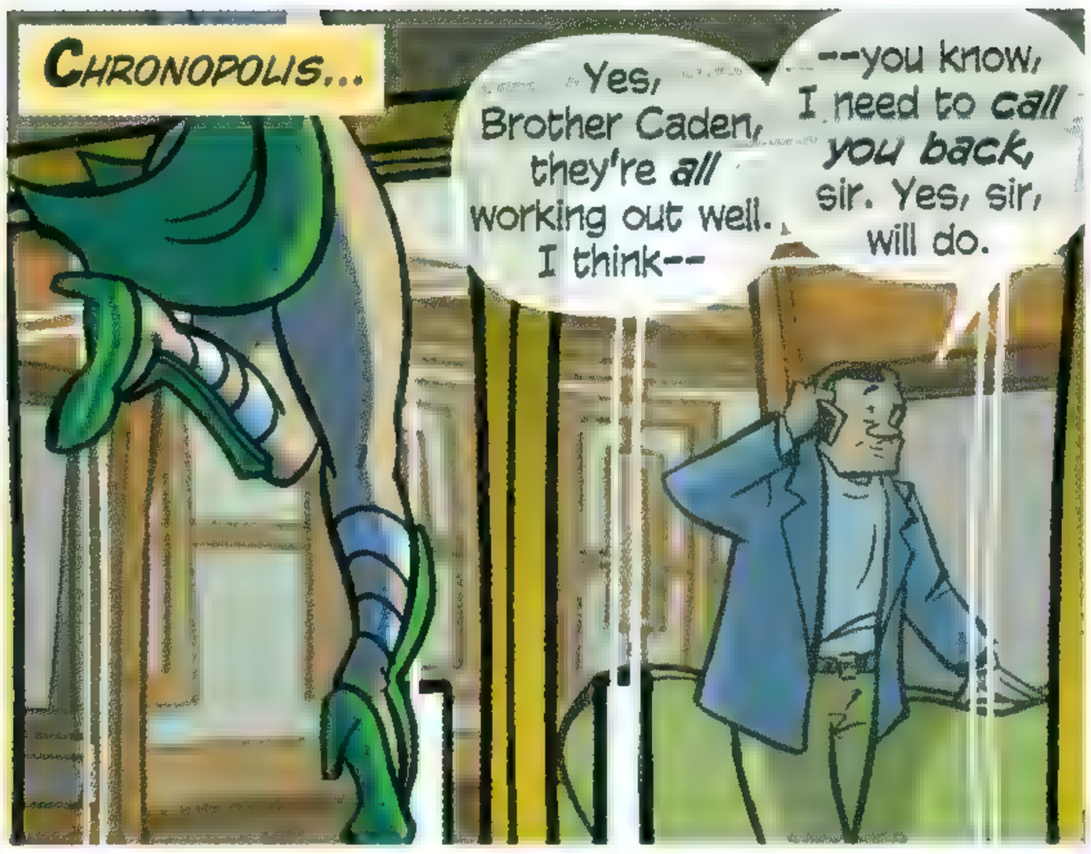
Absolutely.
You needed someone to talk to.

And did you two have a good talk?
You know, we did. And I'll probably be leaning on her again.
Good.

You know, you're welcome to come with us. We're just going to get some dessert.

That's sweet, Mark--
--but I think she deserves some time with her boy.

But, if you were to bring me back a piece of Oreo cheesecake...
Consider it done.
25 WEEKS TO GO...


CHRONOPOLIS...
Yes, Brother Caden, they're *all* working out well. I think--
--you know, I need to *call you back*, sir. Yes, sir, will do.

Zoe! How was the retreat?
It was fine, Paul, but I--

Wait, *hang on!* I *have* to tell you, I figured out our schedules problem! I finally took a sidekick--
--well, *three*, actually, and--

--hey, I'm sure they'd *love* to meet you. Do you--
Paul! *Stop.* Something's *happened!*

When I was at the retreat...my sister *Oriana* came to see me.
I thought she wasn't coming to visit until *next month.*

This *wasn't* a visit. She was *bringing news.*
My *mother...*

Paul, my mother has had a stroke. A *major one.*
She's awake now, but she's *not well.*
The royal physicians *don't know* if she'll recover.

Oh my God, Zoe, that's *terrible.* Are you going *back home* to see her?
Paul, I'm going back home. But not *just* to see her--
--you see, my mother is now *unfit* to *rule*--

--and I'm being summoned back home--
--TO BECOME QUEEN!
TO BE CONTINUED

CHAPTER 4
WHAT?
JUST IN CASE.
ZAHLER 12
+ MANLEY

19 WEEKS TO GO...
Mark, honey, you look like you have something on your *mind*.
Yeah, I guess.

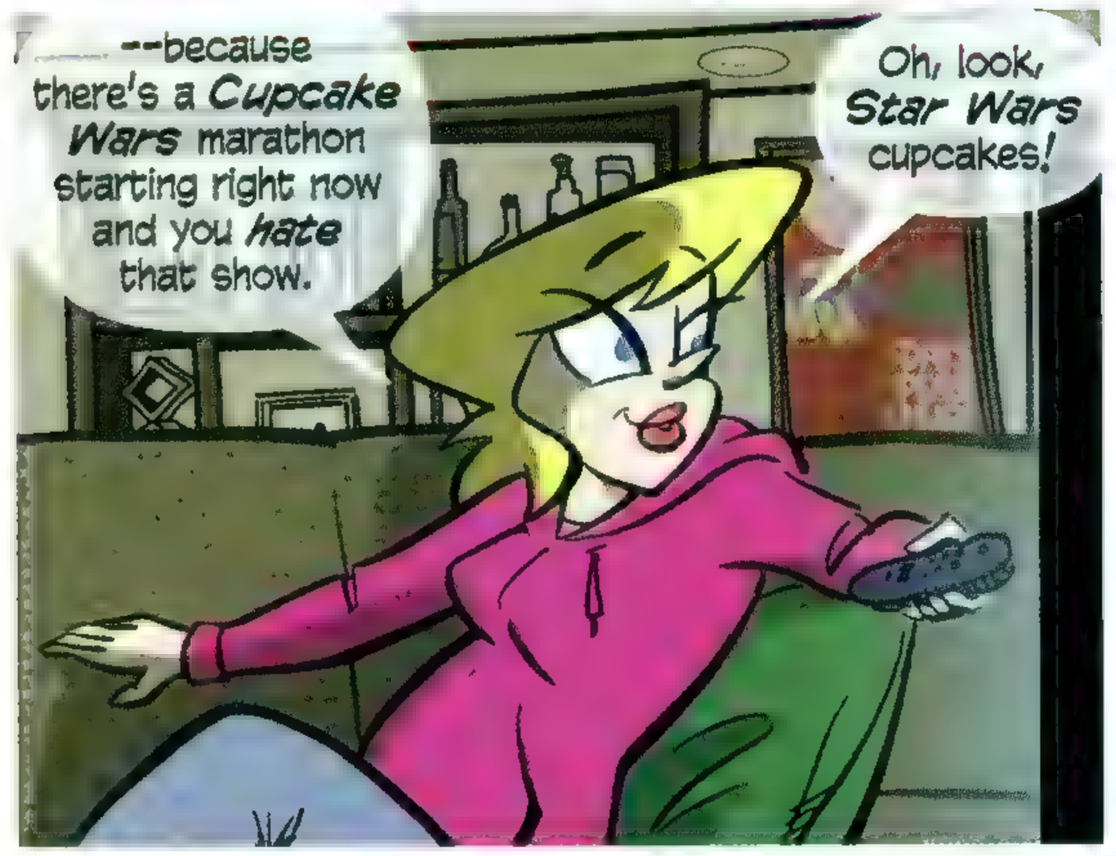
I was just thinking, maybe I should zip over to *Chronopolis* for a bit. You know, to *check in*.
Again? That's very *considerate* of you.

Though, it has been about *six weeks* since Amazonia *left*. Paul's been *ready* for this.
Even so, I'd feel *better* if I popped in for just a bit.

You're going to be one of those *helicopter parents*, you know.
No I'm not.
Who needs some *silly machine* to hover?

Are you *sure* you're okay with this?
Mark, it's *fine*. Do what you have to. You're a *good friend*.

Thanks, Abby, I'll be back soon.
Take your time--


--because there's a *Cupcake Wars* marathon starting right now and you *hate* that show.
Oh, look, *Star Wars* cupcakes!

Hey, *there* you are!
You really *don't* have to keep checking in on me, you know?

Hey, that's just part of the service, *Grant.*

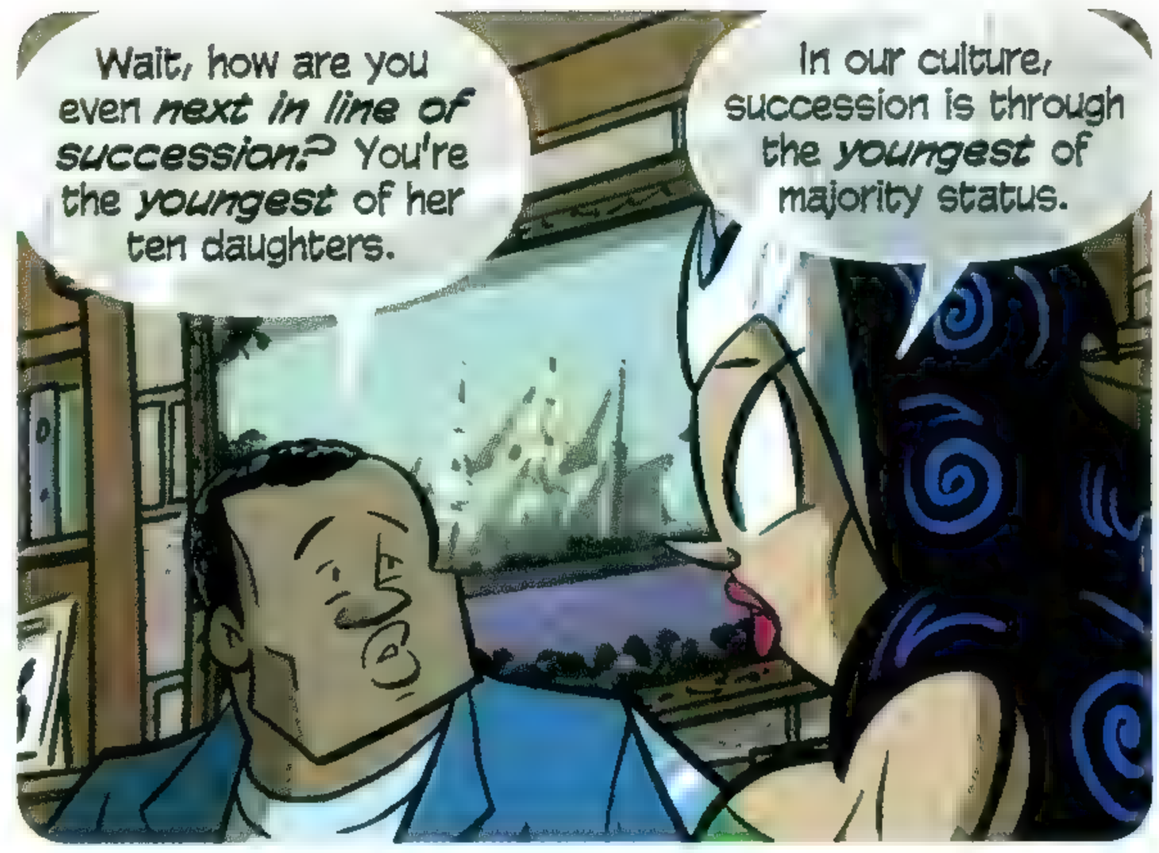
You and the other two interns are doing *great work* filling in for Paul while he's in *Leandia* for the weekend, but a little extra help never hurts.

I suppose not.

How's it *going?*

STORY AND ART BY THOM ZAHLER

SIX WEEKS AGO...
--you're becoming queen?
Until Mother recovers from her stroke, I'm being recalled to Leandia to rule in her stead.


Wait, how are you even next in line of succession? You're the youngest of her ten daughters.
In our culture, succession is through the youngest of majority status.

Why would you replace someone whom age has made infirm or claimed outright with the next oldest person you can find?

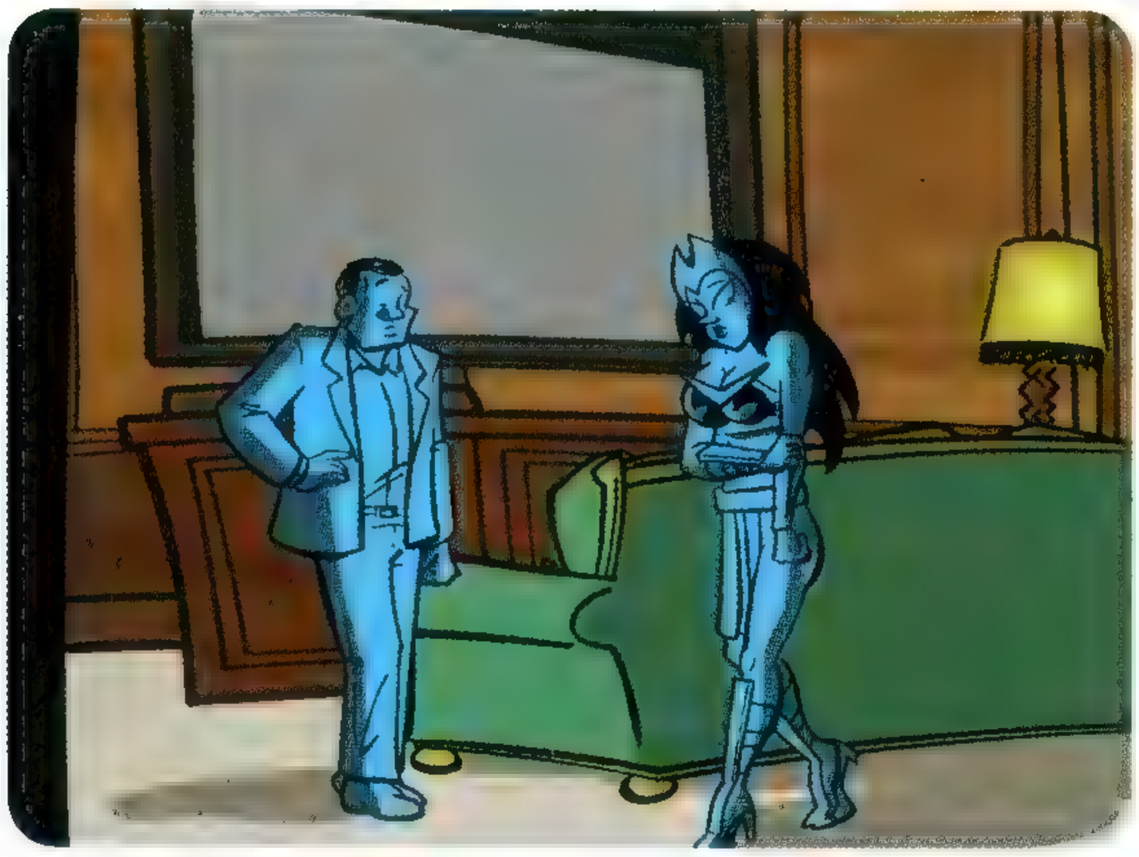
And this is how you choose your next ruler?
Oh, right, and your Electoral College makes so much more sense.

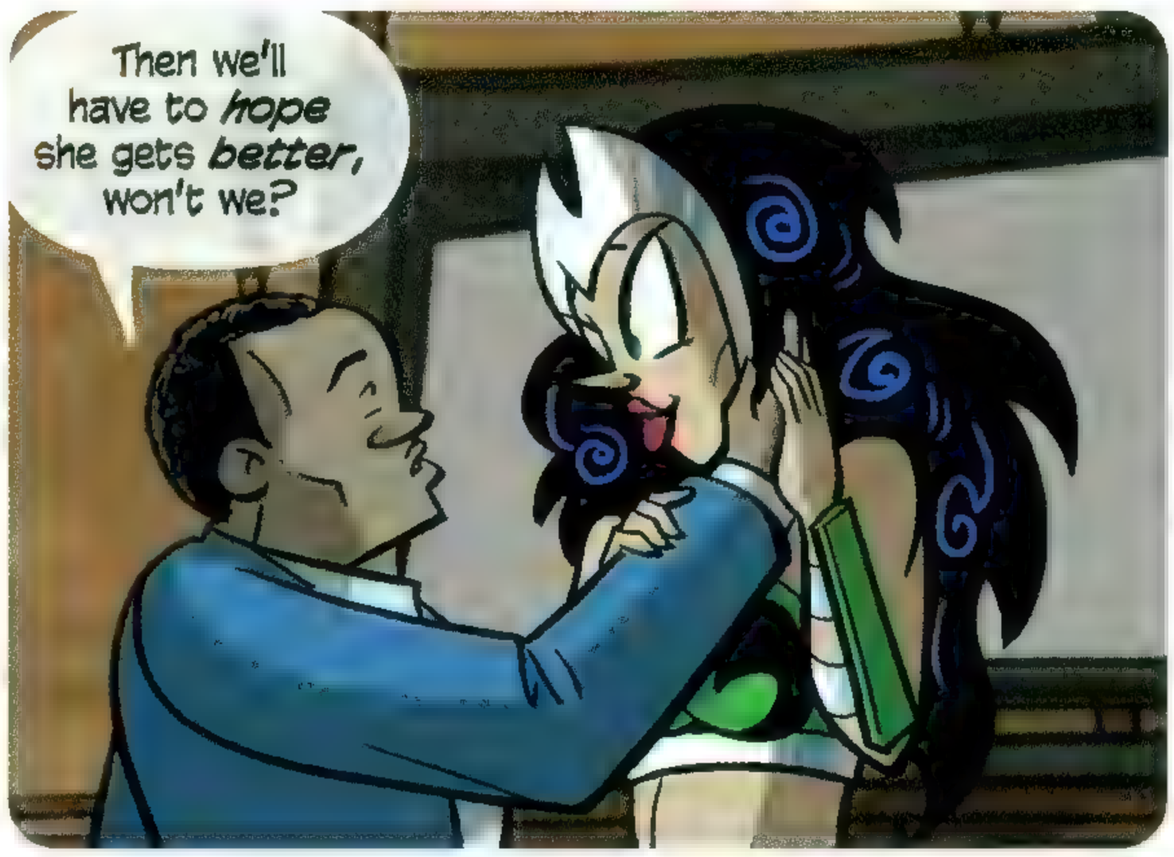
So, how long will you be gone?
I don't know.

But we're a martial society, Paul. If Mother isn't well enough to fight, she can't lead.
It's up to the Royal Physician to decide if and when she's recovered enough-- or if she ever will.

And what's the Physician's criteria for deciding that she's well enough?

Weren't you listening? We're a martial society. She has to defeat the Physician in combat.
I should have seen that coming.

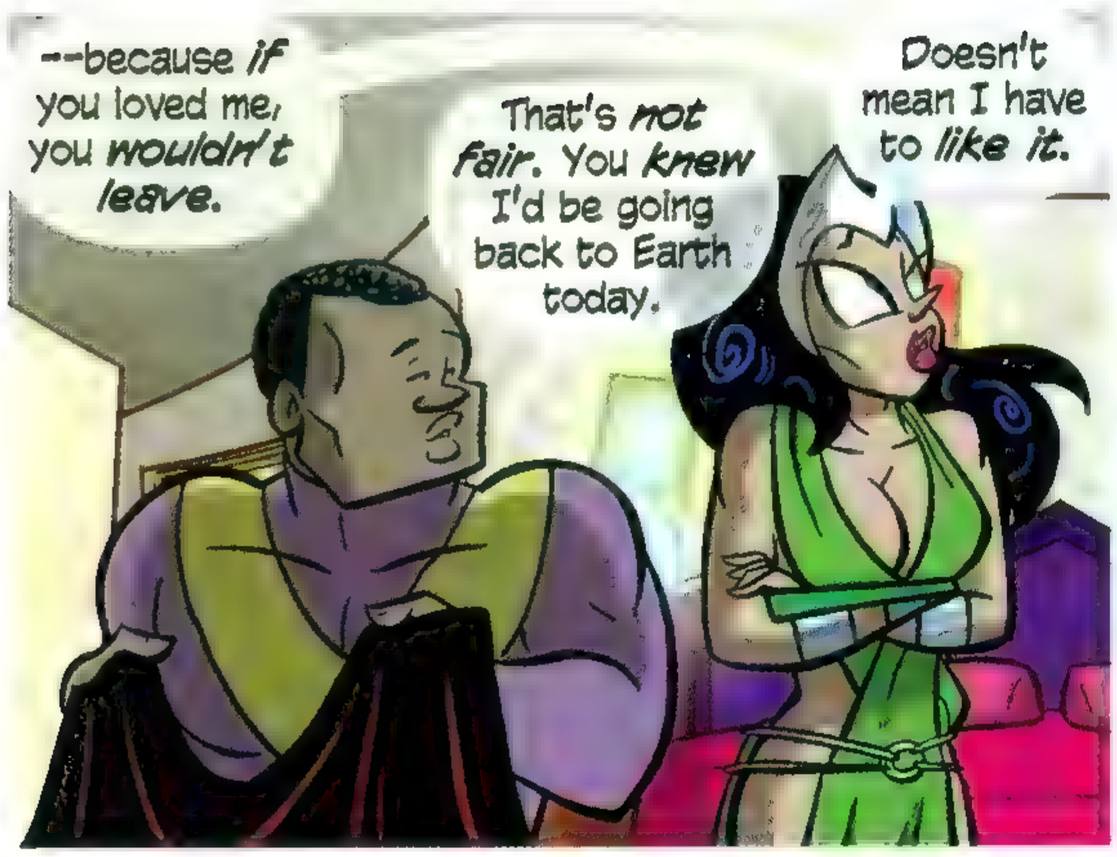




I love you *so much*.

Really--?

Now...

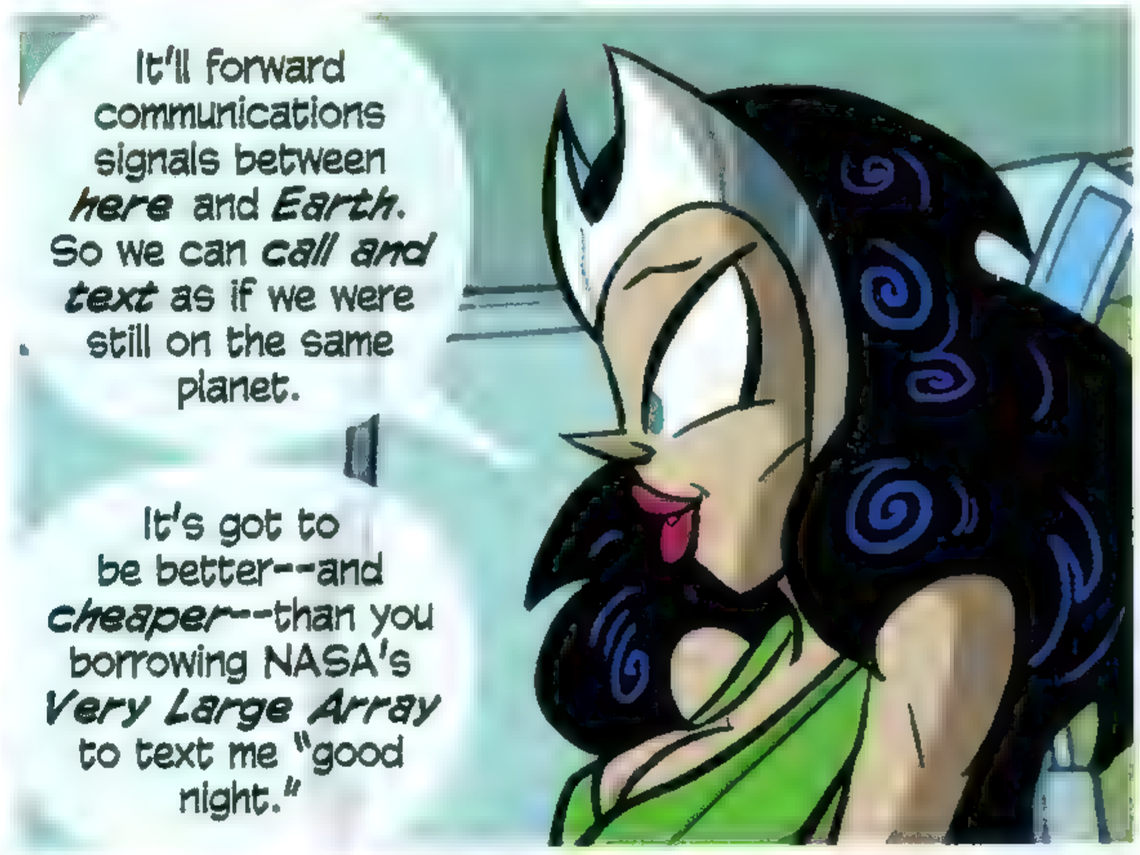

--because *if* you loved me, you *wouldn't leave.*
That's *not fair.* You *knew* I'd be going back to Earth today.
Doesn't mean I have to *like it.*

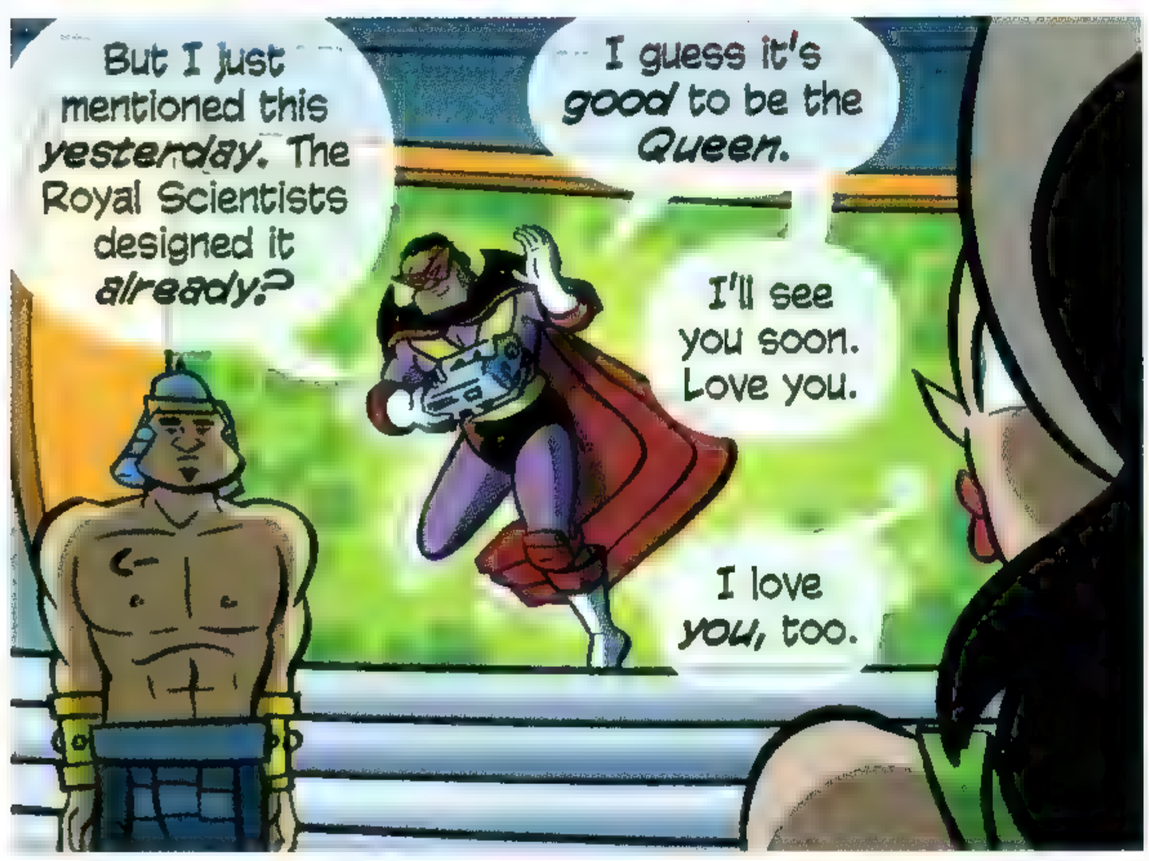
Zoe...
You've got *three interns* filling in for you. You could stay an extra *day.* Or *month.*

I've got three interns, sure. Interns who need *training* and have been *left alone* all weekend.
They probably took the *Airblade* out for a joyride, had a *wild party,* and *trashed* the mansion.

Your movie studio has made way *too many* teen comedies.
No, I hired way too many *cleaning crews* my senior year.

THEN...
Oh, what's *this* now?
It was your idea. It's a *trans-dimensional repeater.*


It'll forward communications signals between *here* and *Earth.* So we can *call and text* as if we were still on the same planet.
It's got to be better--and *cheaper*--than you borrowing NASA's *Very Large Array* to text me "good night."


But I just mentioned this *yesterday.* The Royal Scientists designed it *already?*
I guess it's *good* to be the *Queen.*
I'll see you soon. Love you.
I love *you,* too.

Good to be the Queen?
Not always.

ELSEWHERE...
Hey, Abby, how's it going?
Just *fine*, honey. What's up?

Oh, just coming to say "*hello*." Baby's good?
Baby's doing *fine*.

You know, pregnancy is giving you a *real glow*--
Mark, if you've got *bad news* or something, just *say it*. You *don't* have to cushion it like this.

Oh, *whew!* I was about to offer to go to *Italy* and pick up some *gelato*.
Whoa! Hey! Nobody mentioned gelato.

So, *what* is it?
Well, I've been doing the *quarterly reports* for the *bookstore*--
And?

Abby, the bookstore's *in the red*. Not by a lot, and your rainy-day fund will help, but things are *trending downward*.
It's something you're going to have to *think about*.

Not that you don't have *enough* on your mind already carrying the *Baby Wonder*.
Oh, is *that* what we're calling her now?

You said you didn't like "The *next step* in the *evolution* of the *human race*."
Well, that's a *lot* of *pressure* to put on a kid, Mark.

Anyway, fixed expenses are *up* and sales are *down*.
I don't know if you have *any ideas* on how to improve things--

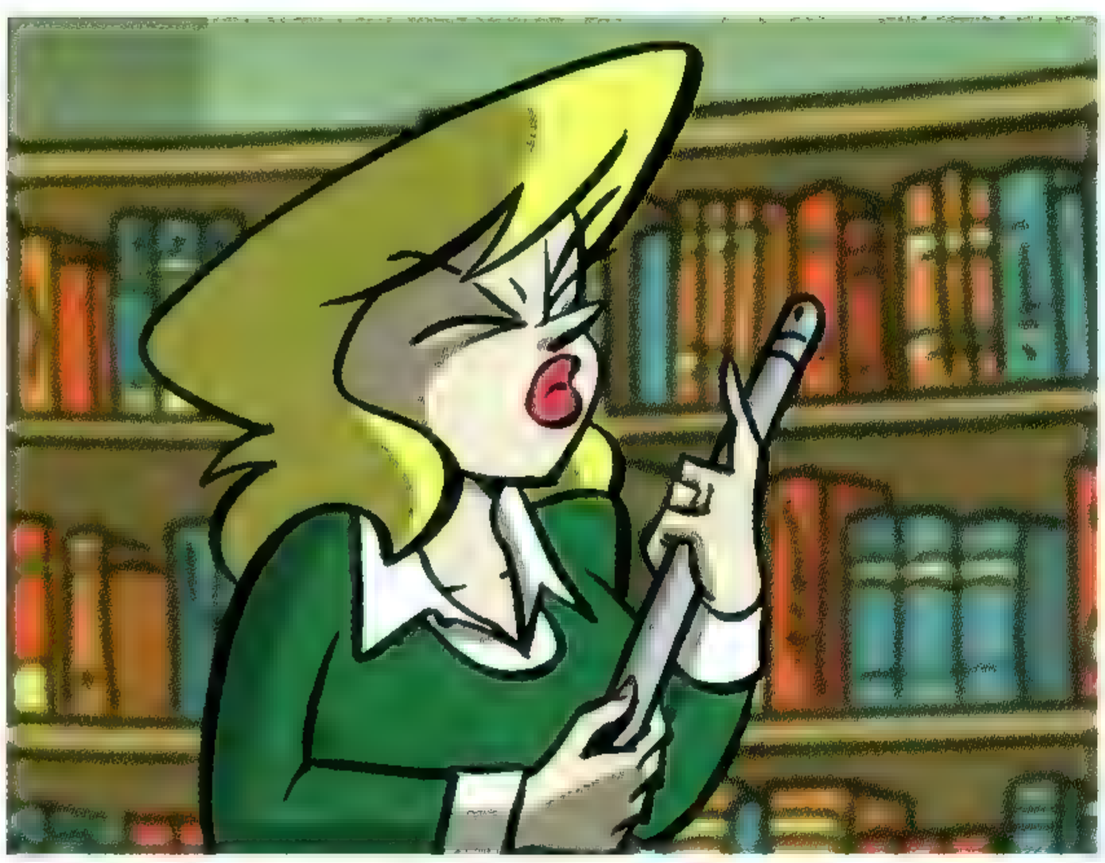
Oh, I *do*. It's an idea I've been kicking around for a while.
It is a *little involved*, though.

First, we detonate a *massive nuclear device* in *low Earth orbit*.
The resulting *electromagnetic pulse* will wipe out all *electronics* and *book readers*, and people will *have* to come back to bookstores to buy books. *Problem solved*.

Okay, let me rephrase: Do you have any plans that I wouldn't have to *thwart*?
That may take *more time*.

LATER...
Hmmmm.

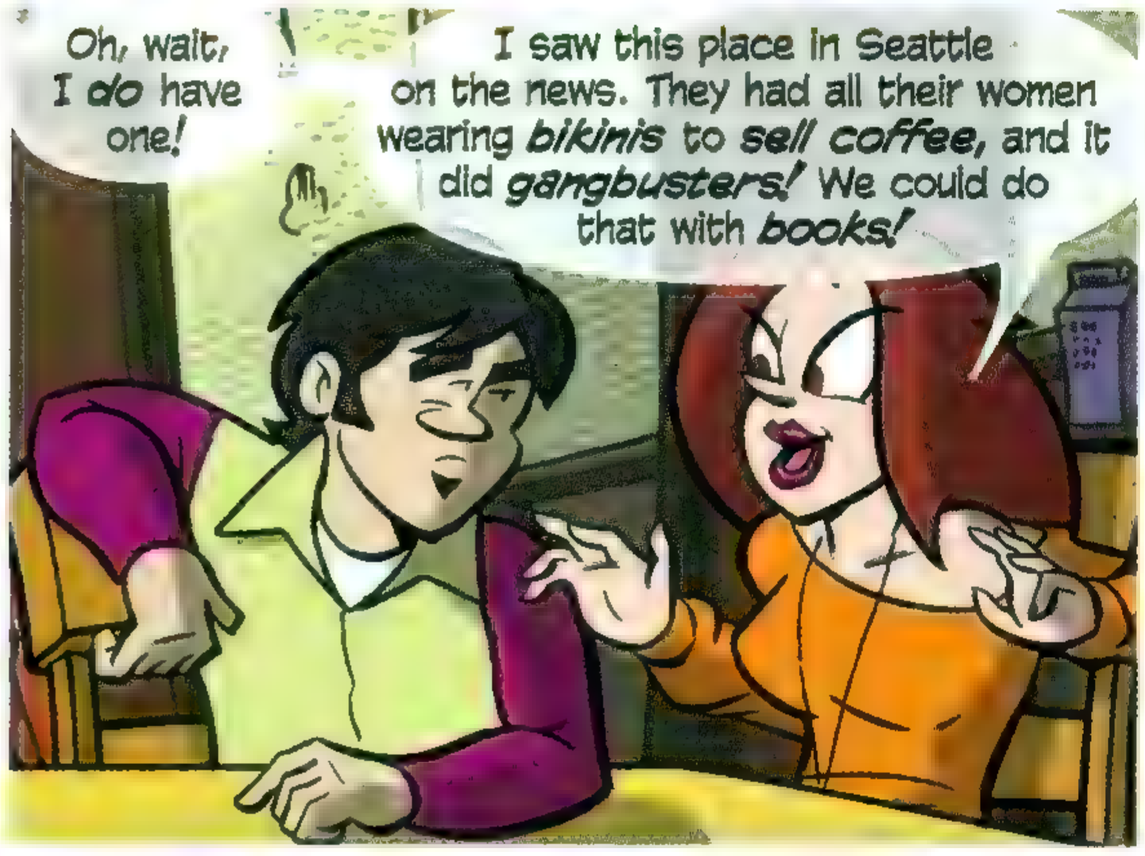
SELL FASTER!

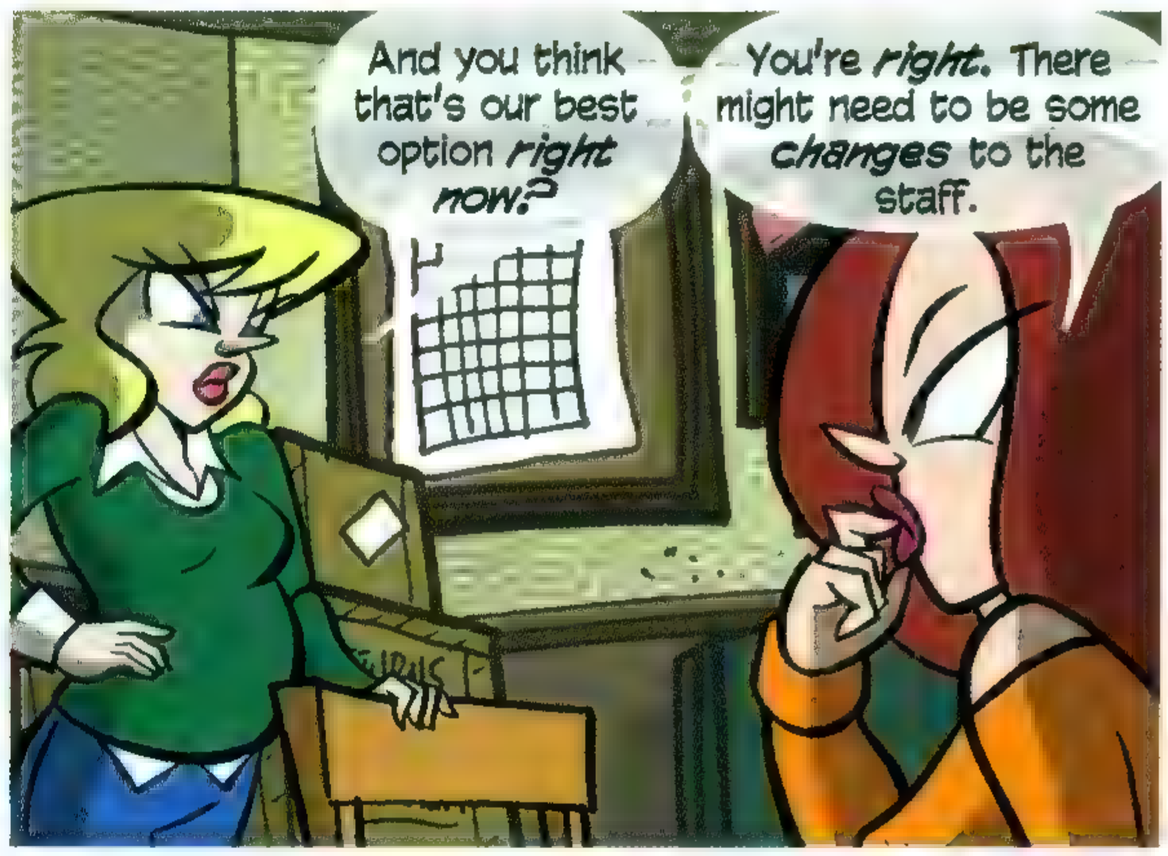


Oh, well, it was worth a *try*.

THEN...
--so that's the story. We've got to start getting sales up.
But, to be clear, you're not firing anyone, right? Those aren't bad news doughnuts?

Don't worry, Charlotte. The baby made the executive decision to bring the doughnuts.
Other than that, though, she's had no input. So if either of you have any ideas...

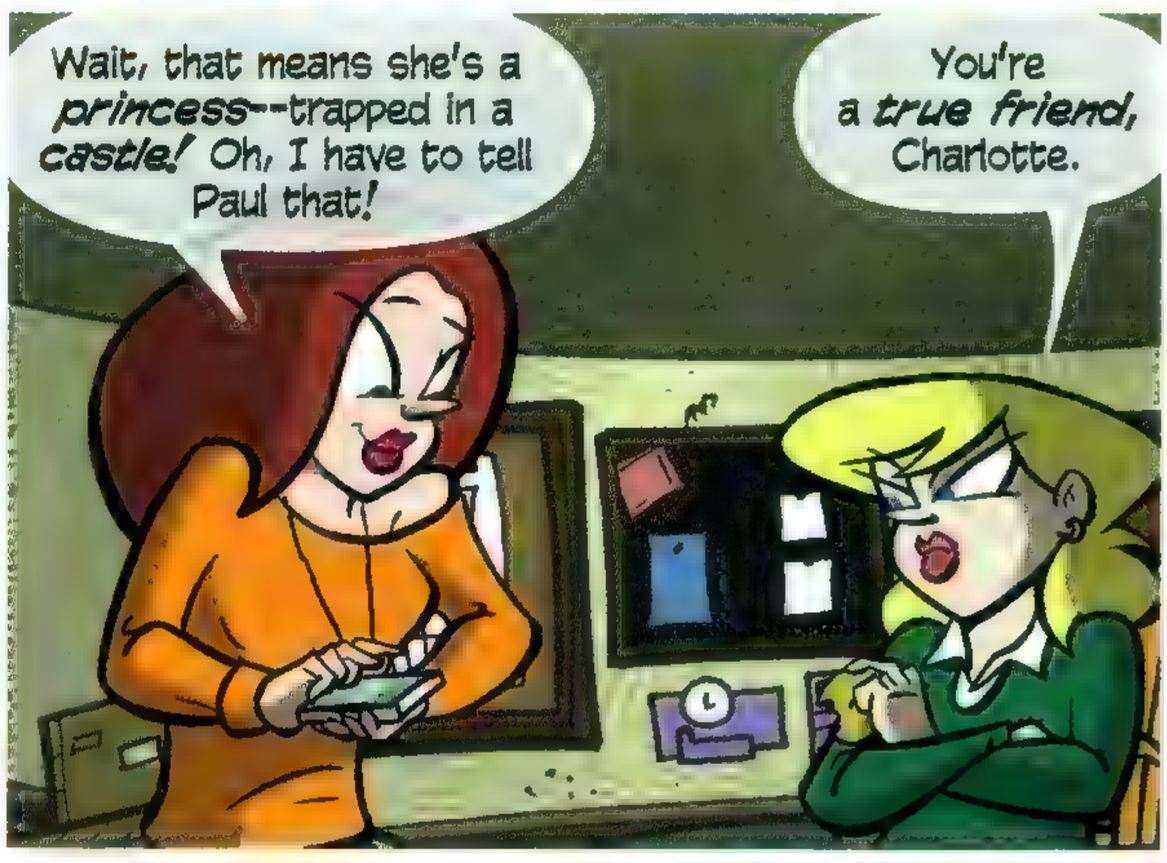

Oh, wait, I do have one!
I saw this place in Seattle on the news. They had all their women wearing bikinis to sell coffee, and it did gangbusters! We could do that with books!


And you think that's our best option right now?
You're right. There might need to be some changes to the staff.

I'll let you know if I think of anything, Abby.
Actually, I do have an idea.
A serious one?
Believe it or not.

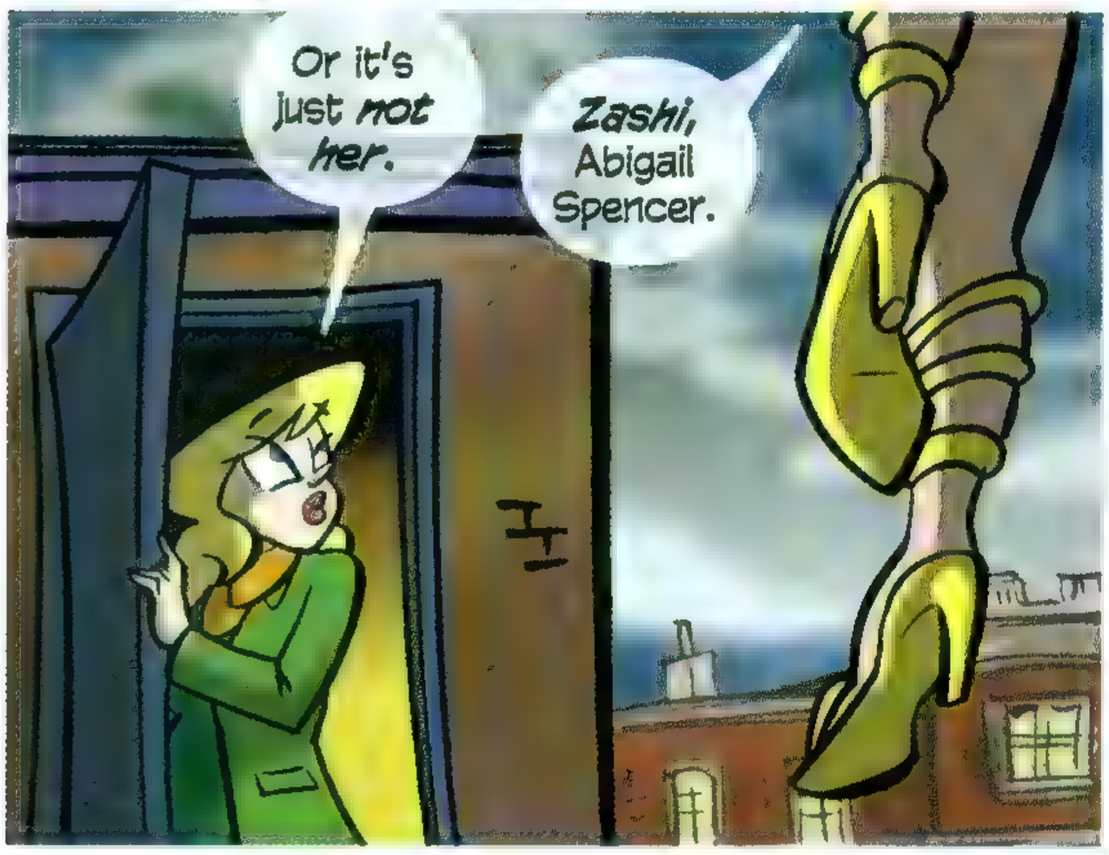
The last time Amazonia did a signing here, it spiked sales and got tons of media attention. Maybe she could do that again?

That is a good idea, but she's still in Leandia, and she's not permitted to leave there as long as she's Queen.
Oh, I didn't realize that was a rule.

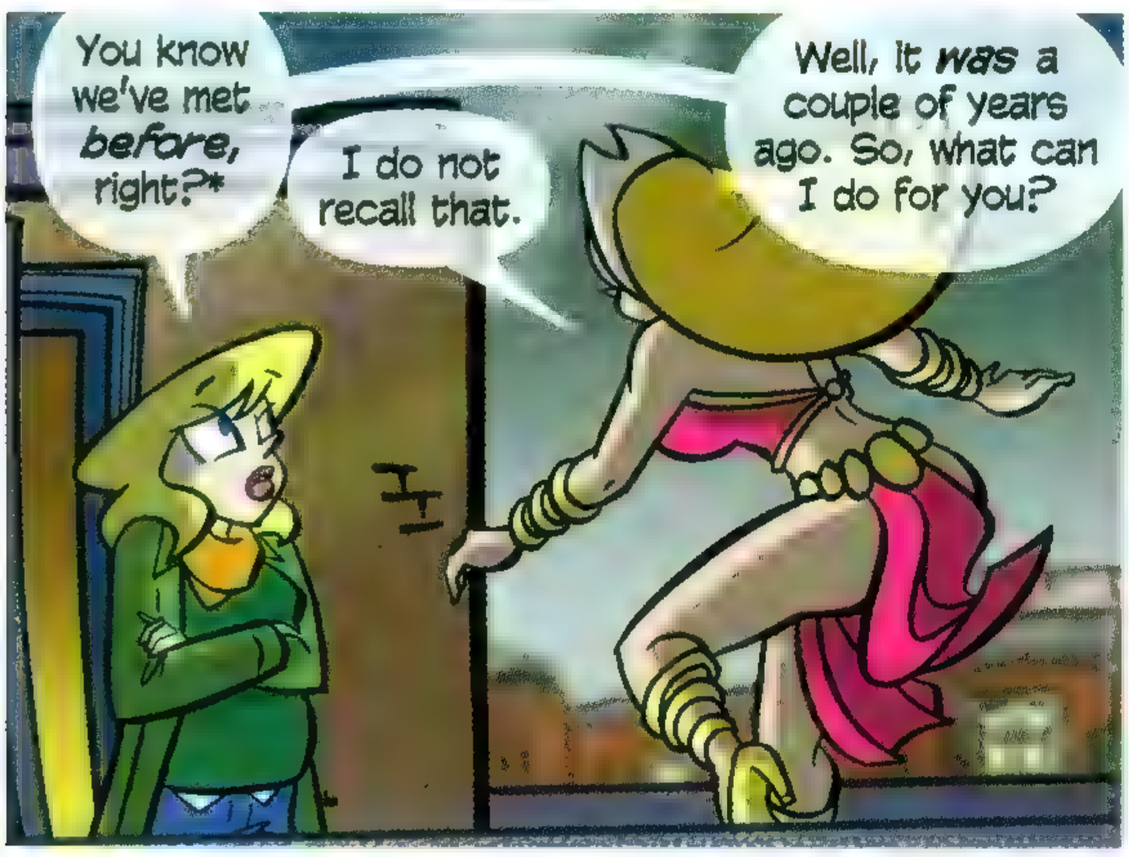

Wait, that means she's a princess--trapped in a castle! Oh, I have to tell Paul that!
You're a true friend, Charlotte.

LATER...
I thought you said Zoe was *stuck* in Leandia.
She *is*, as far as I know. Why?
Because that *upstairs doorbell thing* she uses is *ringing*.

Huh. I suppose maybe her mother got *better* and she's stopping by.


Or it's just *not her*.
Zashi, Abigail Spencer.

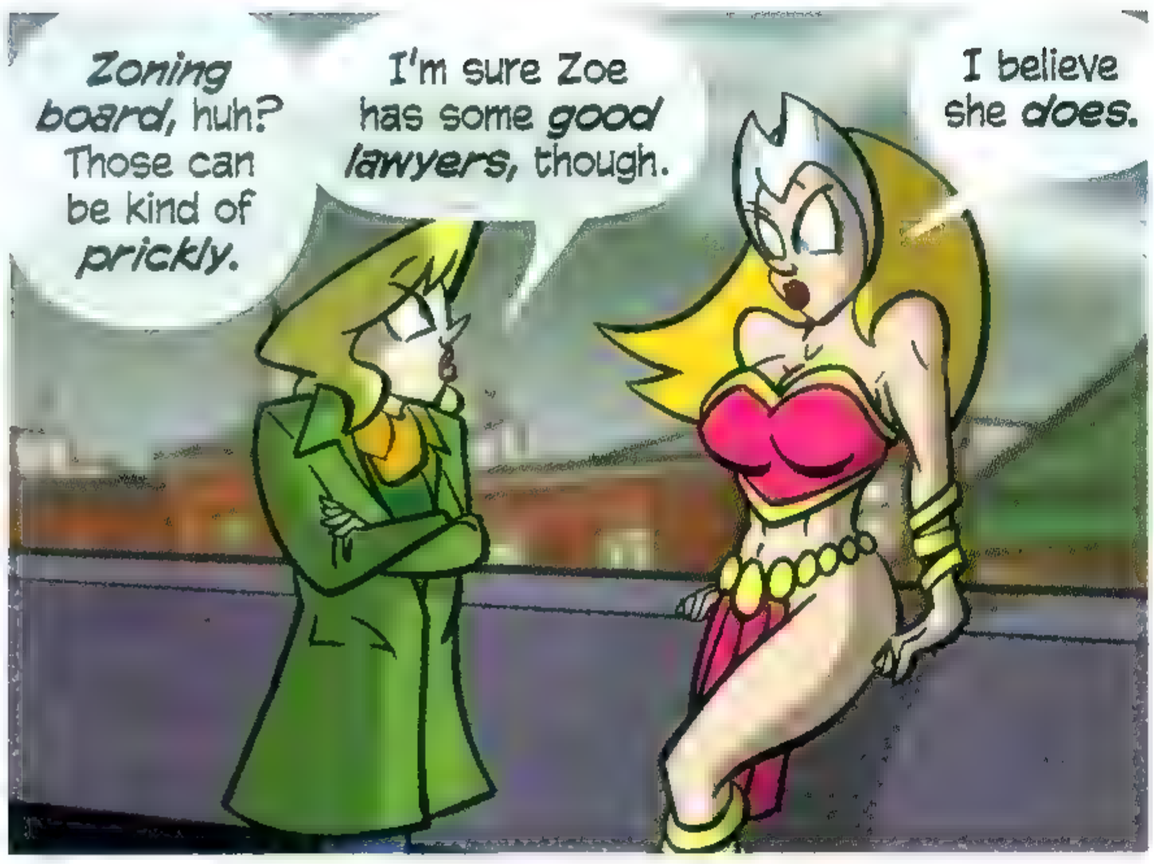
I am the *Princess Oriana*, sister to Amazonia.
Yeah, I can see the *resemblance*.

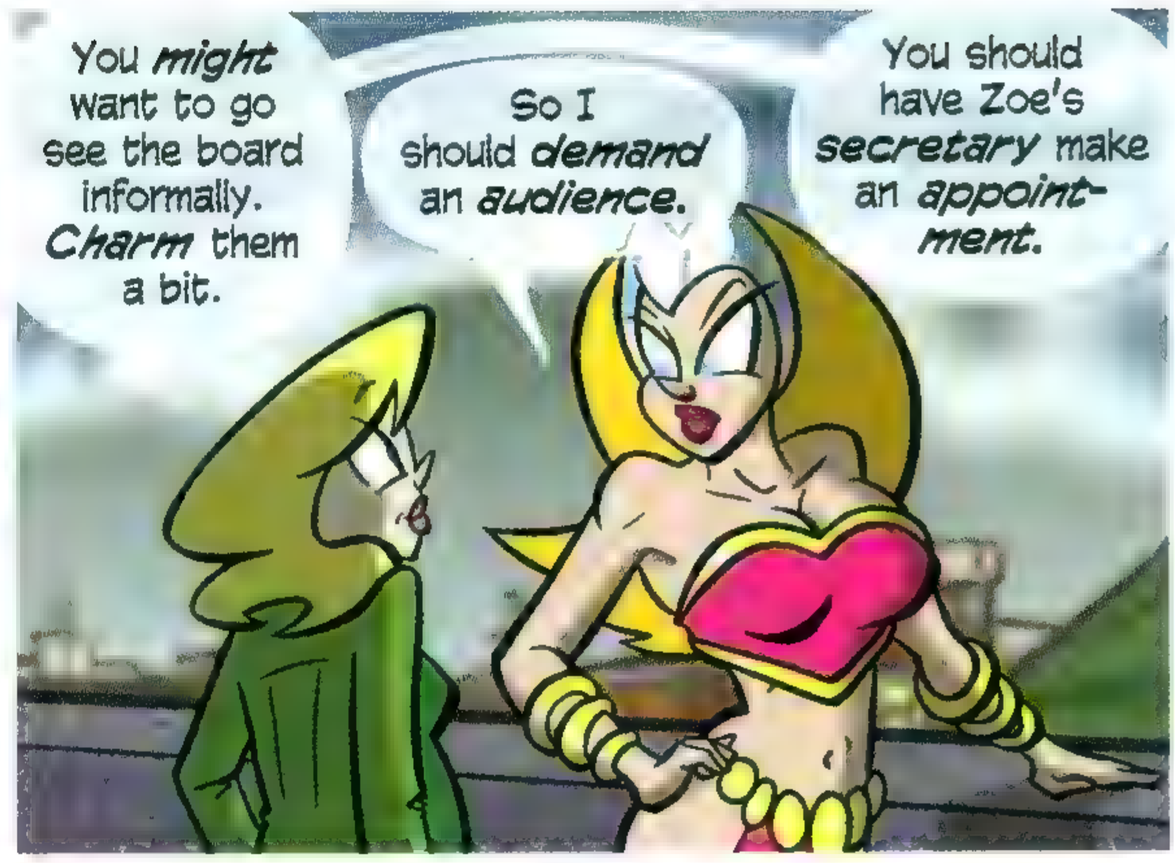

You know we've met *before*, right?*
I do not recall that.
Well, it *was* a couple of years ago. So, what can I do for you?

My sister has charged me with running *her affairs* while she is the Queen-Regent.
And she told me that if I ever had *any questions*, that I was to come seek *your counsel*.

So, will you *aid* me?
Um, *sure*. What do you need?

I need to know *what* is a *Zoning Board* and who are *they* to tell me *how tall* my building can be?!
Oh, this is going to take some *time*.

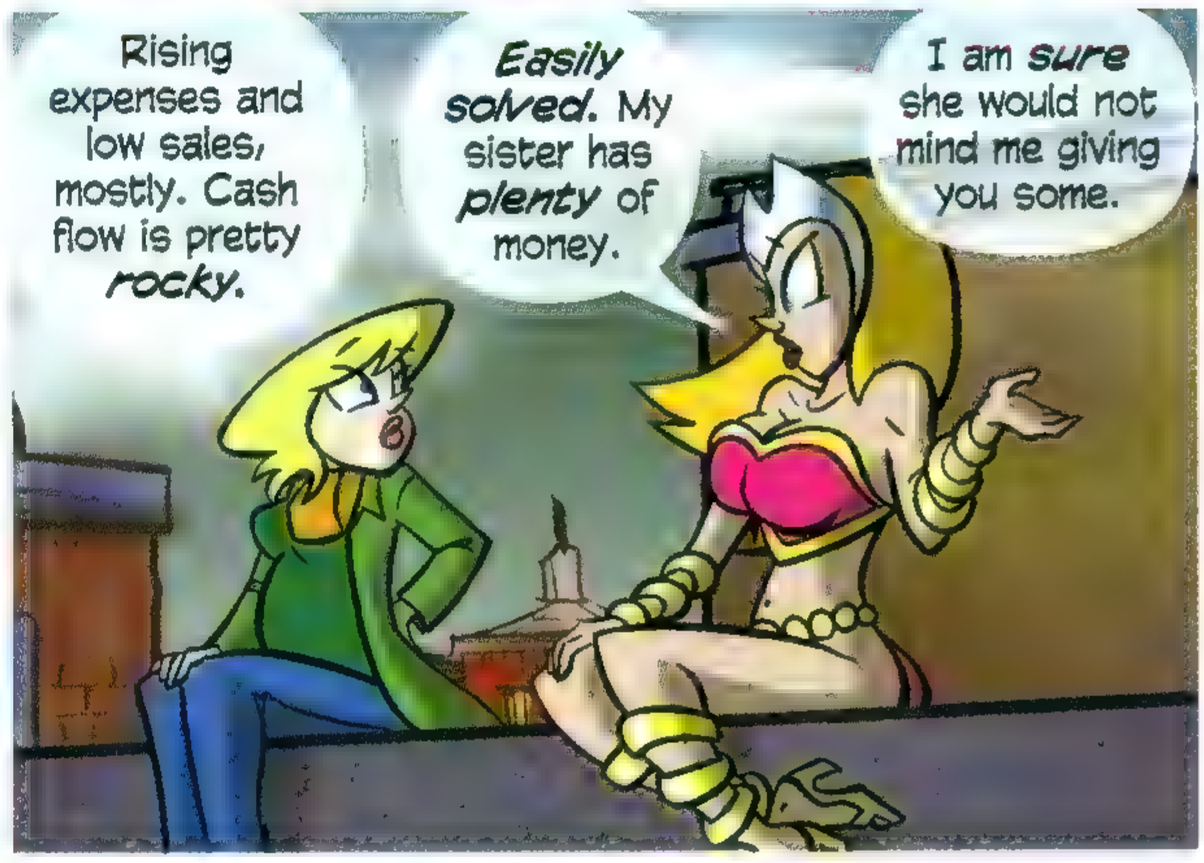

Zoning board, huh? Those can be kind of prickly.
I'm sure Zoe has some good lawyers, though.
I believe she does.


You might want to go see the board informally. Charm them a bit.
So I should demand an audience.
You should have Zoe's secretary make an appointment.

What's this for, anyway?
One of my sister's facilities needs to expand to accomodate more subjects.

Employees. We call them employees.
Whatever.

It's kind of ironic that Zoe sent you to me for business advice now. My own store's not doing so well.
What trials are you facing?


Rising expenses and low sales, mostly. Cash flow is pretty rocky.
Easily solved. My sister has plenty of money.
I am sure she would not mind me giving you some.

Thank you, but this isn't the kind of thing I need to be rescued from, it's the kind of thing I need to solve.
I'm an independent shop in a market that's causing problems for even the large chains. Honestly, the smart move is to start looking for a way out.
But I've put almost ten years of love and work into this place. I'm not giving up.

You have a warrior's heart, Abigail. I did not expect that.
Yeah, I'm surprisingly feisty.

CHRONOPOLIS...
Hey, look who's *back!*
Did you have a *good trip?*

I had a *great* trip.
I always *did* like visiting Leandia.

There are the *crystal forests* and the *fire fountains*...
And watching the suns rise over the *Golden Sea* is just breathtaking.

Yeah, I *didn't* see any of that.
I figured.

How's the Queen Mother's *recovery?*
I don't know. She wasn't taking *any visitors.*
That *doesn't* sound good.

They're a *surprisingly* private people considering the way they *dress.* The medical staff would only say "she's *improving.*"
I *did* convince them to let *Doctor Karma* come and take a look, though.
Smart. I hope he can help.

Me, too.
Still, if the Queen has *half* the determination of her *daughter,* she won't need *any* help.

You really think so?
I kind of *have to.*

If Zoe's sister is filling in for her, she'll need some support on the *hero* side to help her with the way things work *here*.
Of course, *you're* busy with the interns, and I'm trying to make sure I'm around *for Abby* a little more.

I've *thought* of that. I *do* have something in mind.
You have a *plan?*

Always.

Hey, guys! *What* can I do for you?
Hello, *Blurstreak.*
Oh, I didn't realize it was a *desperate plan.*

Mike, Amazonia's sister Oriana has come to Earth to *step in* for her while Zoe is otherwise engaged.
She really needs a *shadow.*

Newbie duty? Seriously? Can't *Arachnerd* do this? It's so boring!
÷Sigh!÷ I *thought* you might say that. So you should know--

--that *this* is Oriana.
Whoa!

--so, if you need anything, *anything* at all, you just give me a call.
I gave you my *number,* right?
Twice.

LATER...
You just scan the bar code and it goes on our baby registry? This is awesome!
How did I not know about this?

Probably because the day we were going to do this for our wedding shower, someone got called to Atlantis.
Oh, yeah. The Sea Critter War.

Now, just remember, it's not a toy and--
Go! Get to da choppah!

Congratulations, you just signed our child up for a riding lawnmower.
Hey, chores are good for a kid.

THEN...
I like this playpen, Mark. It'll collapse down and fit in our car for when we visit the grandparents.

And it got a five-star rating from Parenting Magazine.
Hmmm. I'm just not sure it's for us.

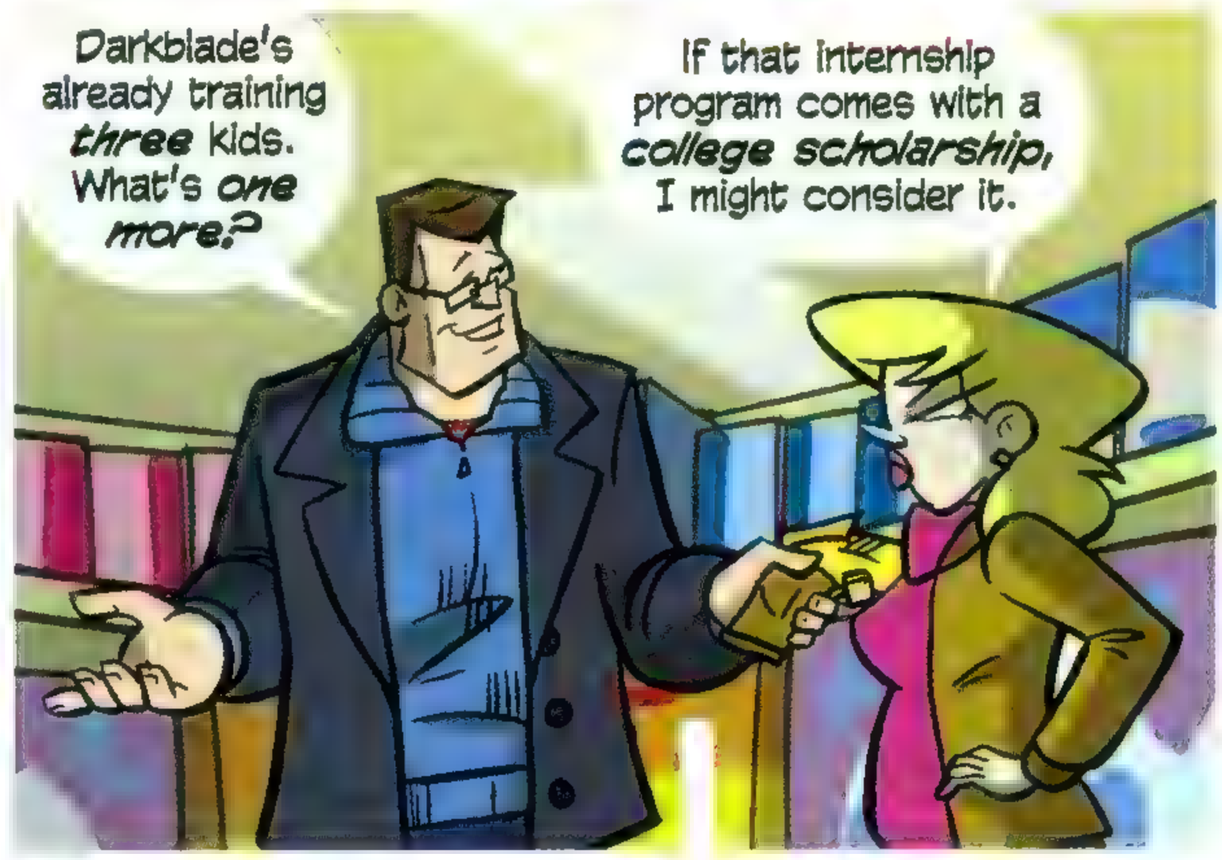
Really? Why not?
We're talking about our child, remember?

We may need something a little more... three-dimensional.

You know, we haven't really talked about the *super powers* thing too much.
Will you be okay if the baby has powers?
I don't really have much of a *choice*, do I?

I suppose we *could* keep Doc Karma's spell in place.
I don't know. That seems like denying her *her heritage*. But I do worry about the *dangerous superhero lifestyle*.
Do *you* want the baby to have powers?

I can't deny it'd be fun to play in a *volcano*, teach him how to catch an *asteroid*.
You know, *typical father-son stuff*.
And if she *doesn't* have powers?

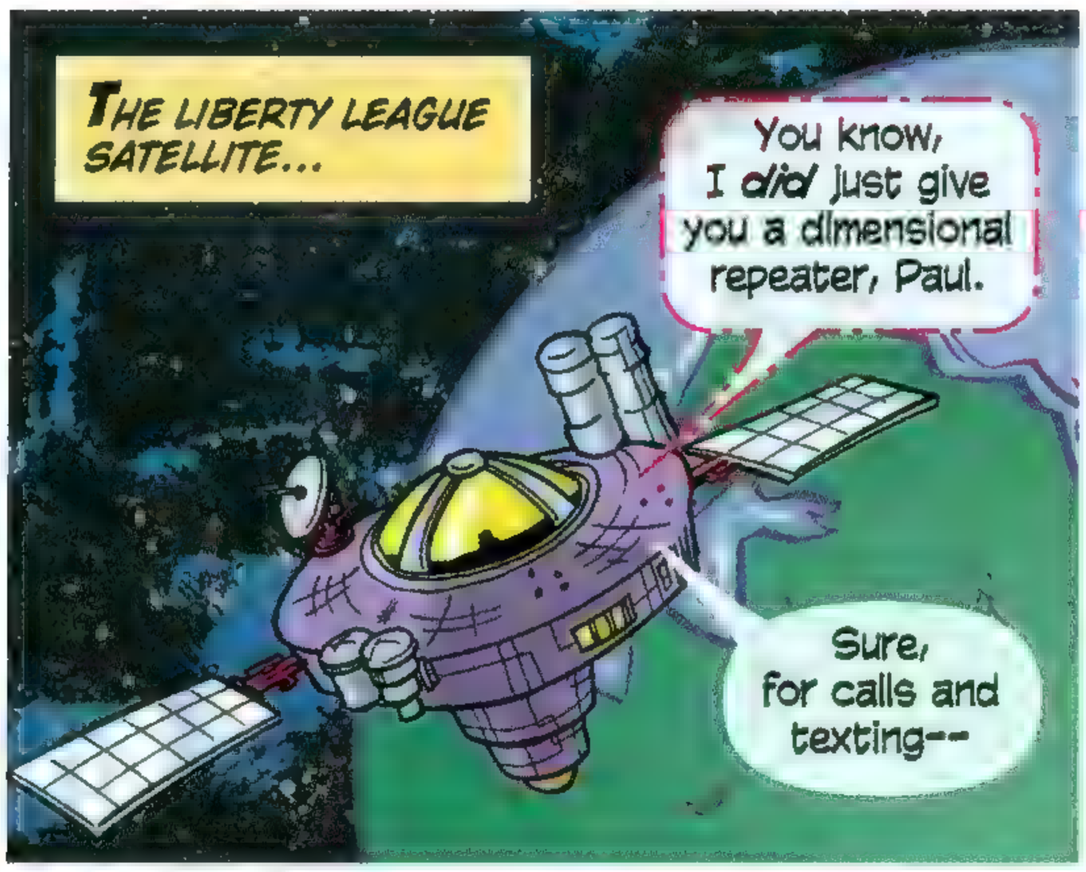

Darkblade's already training *three* kids. What's *one more?*
If that internship program comes with a *college scholarship*, I might consider it.

Even if he has powers, he doesn't *have* to be a superhero, you know.
Oh, that bottle warmer, Definitely.

Got it.
I mean, Windstar's father had powers and *never* joined the life. Heck, Golden Torch's son became a *super villain* and--
What?!

--oh, that was *so* not the right thing to say--
Are you saying *our baby* could turn into a *super villain?*

No! Not-- but we--
I mean, you're going to be such a *good mother*--
Keep it up and I'll be a *single mother*, too.


THE LIBERTY LEAGUE SATELLITE...
You know, I did just give you a dimensional repeater, Paul.
Sure, for calls and texting--

--but sometimes I like to see you.
How's your mother doing?
Well, I do like seeing you, too.

I think she's getting a little better. I was telling her to do her physical therapy and she threw a tray at me again.
And just how is that getting better?

This time she only missed me by half an inch.

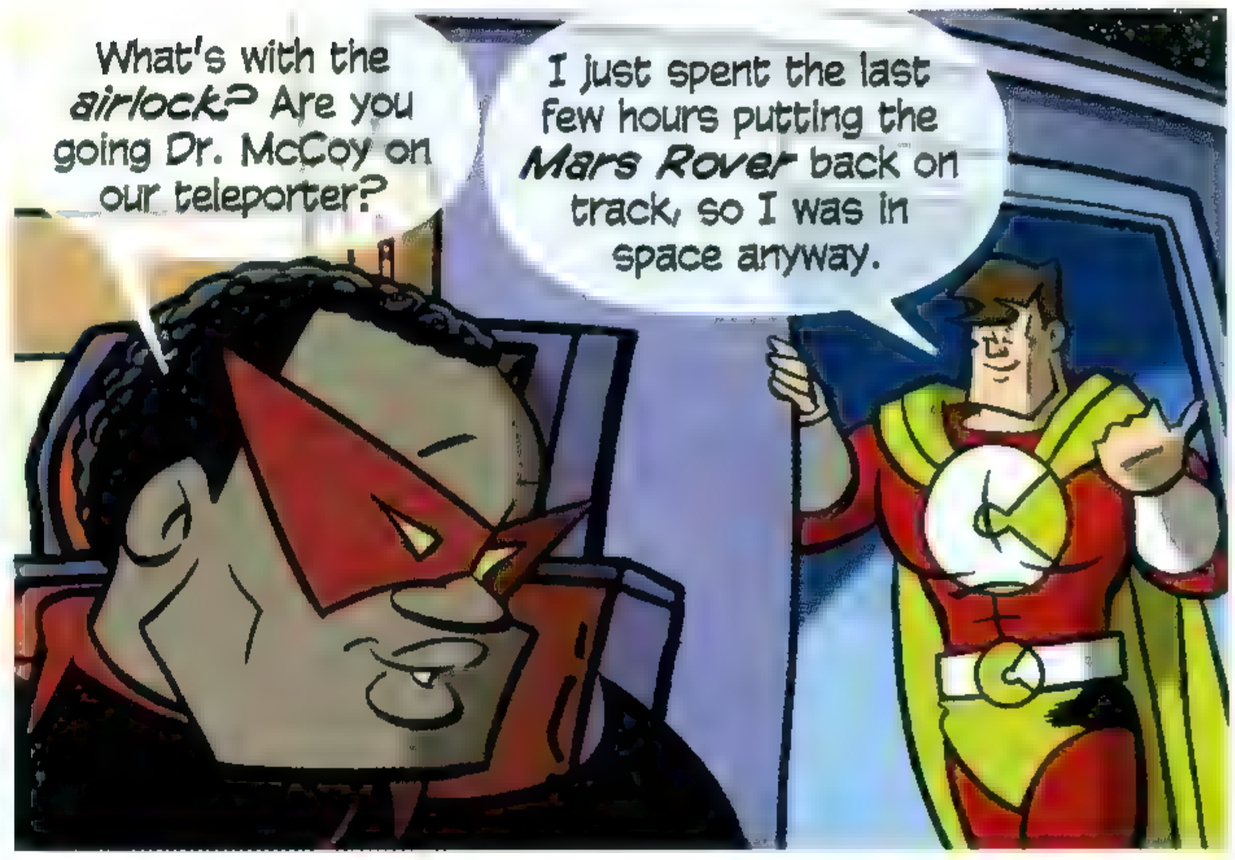
So tell me what's going on back there.

Nothing, really. It's been quiet. Everything's pretty ordinary.

I miss ordinary.
And pizza--
--and Jeni's ice cream--
--and "Deadliest Catch."

Are you getting all this?
Keep going. Twenty dollars more and this care package gets free shipping.

Looks like Mark's coming aboard, dear. I'm going to *let you go.*
I love *you,* too.
Goodnight, Paul. I *love you.*
AIRLOCK OPEN


What's with the *airlock?* Are you going Dr. McCoy on our teleporter?
I just spent the last few hours putting the *Mars Rover* back on track, so I was in space anyway.

I didn't mean to cut short your *call,* though. I'm sure the *long-distance* thing has to be rough.
No?
Not really.

Well, it's not really *distance.* Since her vibrational plane shares space with ours, it's more a question of *quantum mechanical spin* and--
You *know* this is why no one likes you, right?

MEANWHILE, ON EARTH...
Oh look, *mail.*

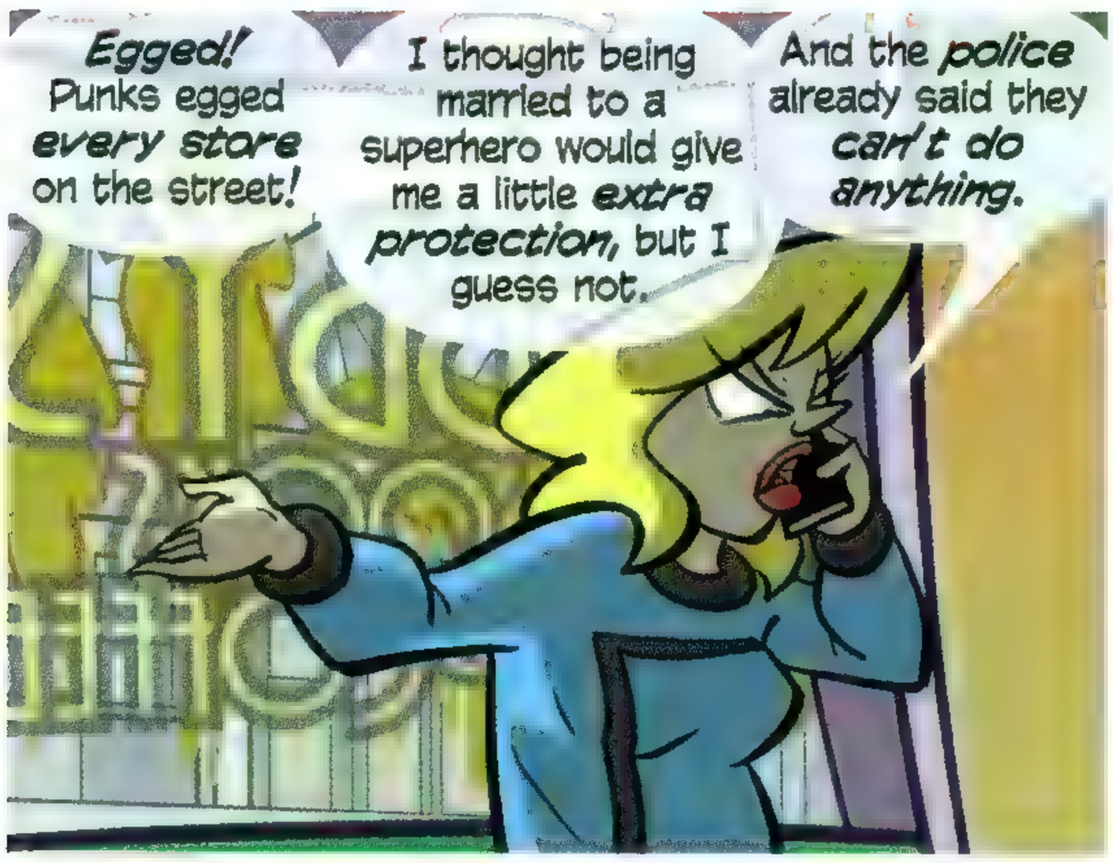
Well, not so much mail as *bills.* And *junk.* And--

EEEK!

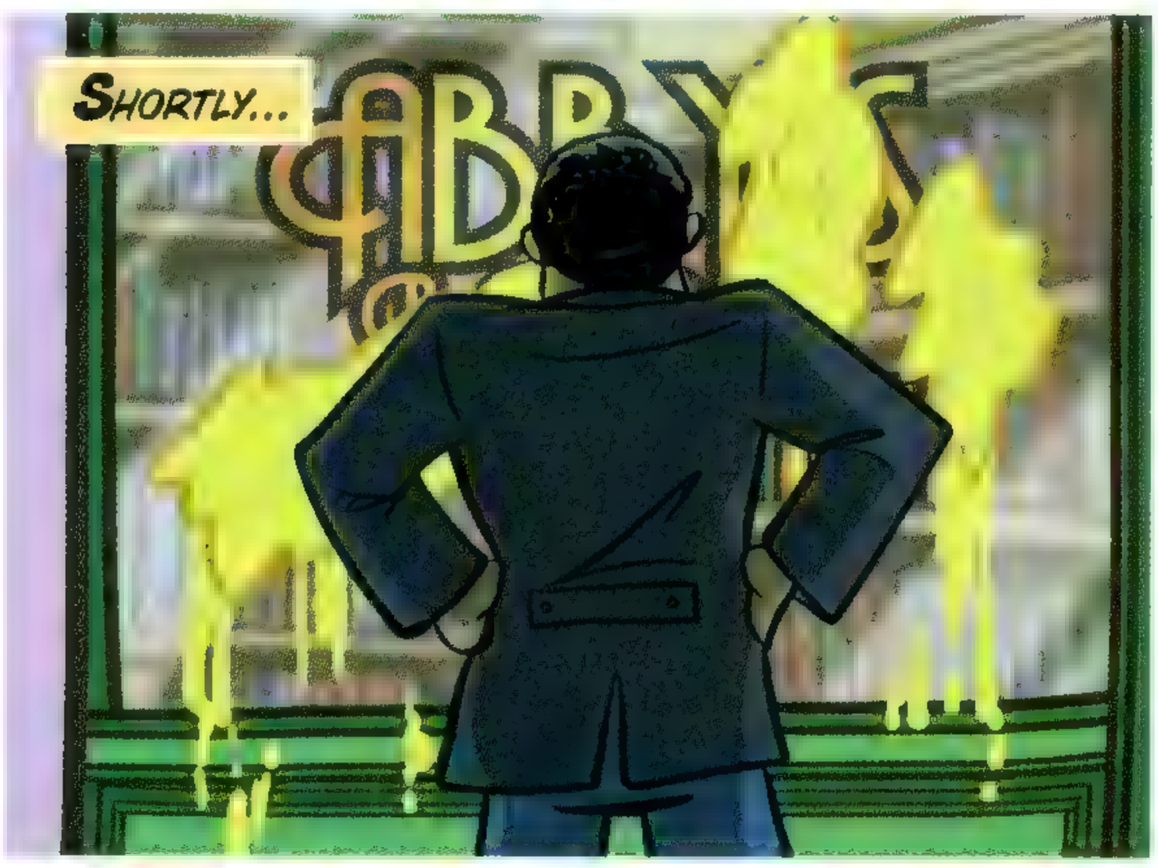
Sigh! The hits just *keep on coming.*

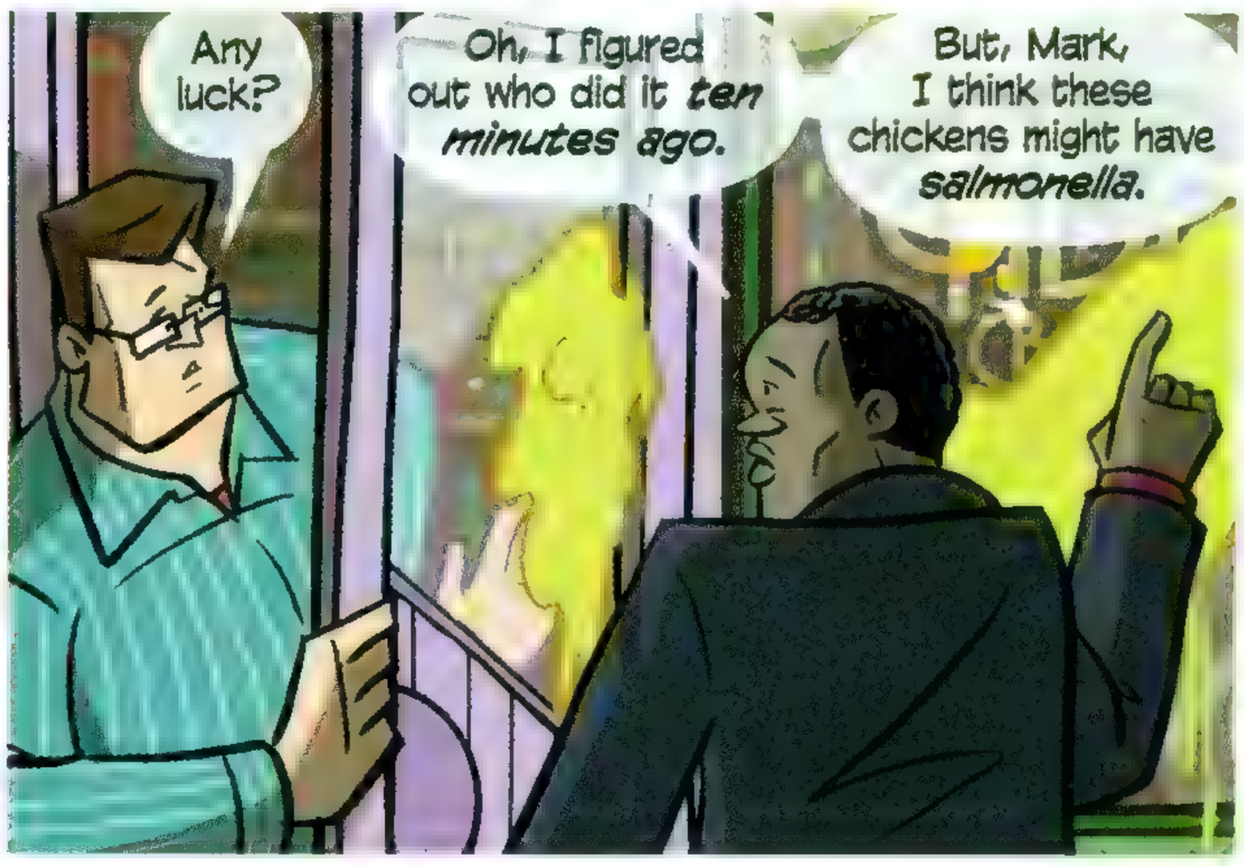
--it's just empty. I got used to having her *here* and now there are all these gaps in my day.
Sorry, hang on. This is *Abby*.

Hey, honey--
What? Just *slow down*. What happened?


Egged! Punks egged *every store* on the street!
I thought being married to a superhero would give me a little *extra protection*, but I guess not.
And the *police* already said they *can't do anything*.

They may not be able to--
--but I *do* know a *master detective* with a *lot* of free time these days.


SHORTLY...


Any luck?
Oh, I figured out who did it *ten minutes ago*.
But, Mark, I think these chickens might have *salmonella*.

THAT NIGHT...
You think it's fun to vandalize people's businesses? Do you, punk?
N-n-not anymore.
Sir.

I should just let you drop. But killing you means I'd have to clean up the mess.
Because I wouldn't just leave it for someone else!

Still, maybe it'd be worth getting a mop and bucket and--

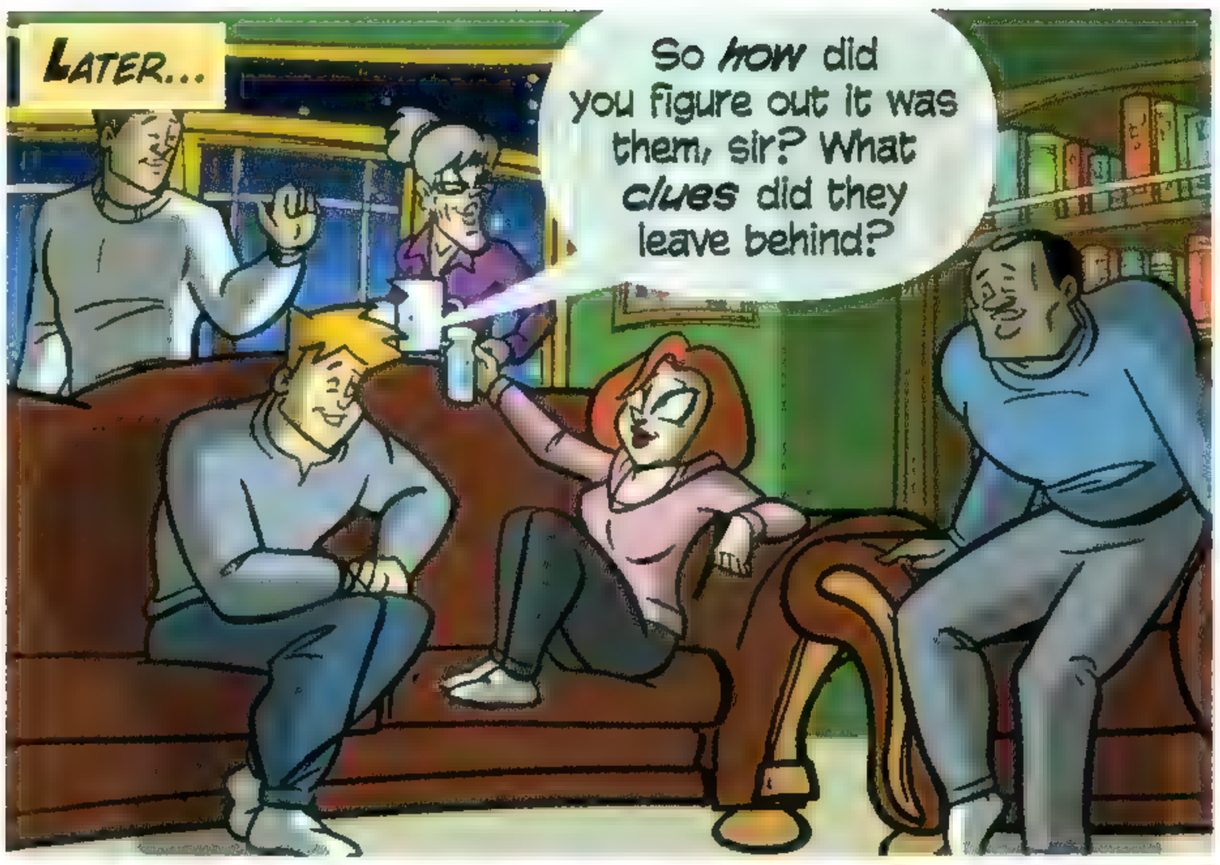
He passed out, sir.
Then you pass!
Good job, but for next time, we don't like saying "kill." Try "whack" or "ice."
Okay, you're up next, Dynamite.

AND SO...
Next question, troops. Why do we leave them to confess to the police, rather than walking them in?
POLICE

Because staying out of sight helps build our legend?
No, because guilty must confess themselves to be redeemed.
Security cameras?

All true statements, but none of them are why. If we linger--

--then we get stuck doing paperwork.
And that strikes fear into even my heart.
Come on. Let's go home.


LATER...
So *how* did you figure out it was them, sir? What *clues* did they leave behind?

You know, that's a *great question.*
Let's make it an *assignment*. First one of you who figures it out gets a week of *solo patrol* with me.

Now get to bed. *Good job tonight,* and I'll see you in the morning for *combat training.*
Good night, sir.
'Night!

So, their reward is they get to place themselves in even *more* danger?
Hey, they signed the *waivers.*

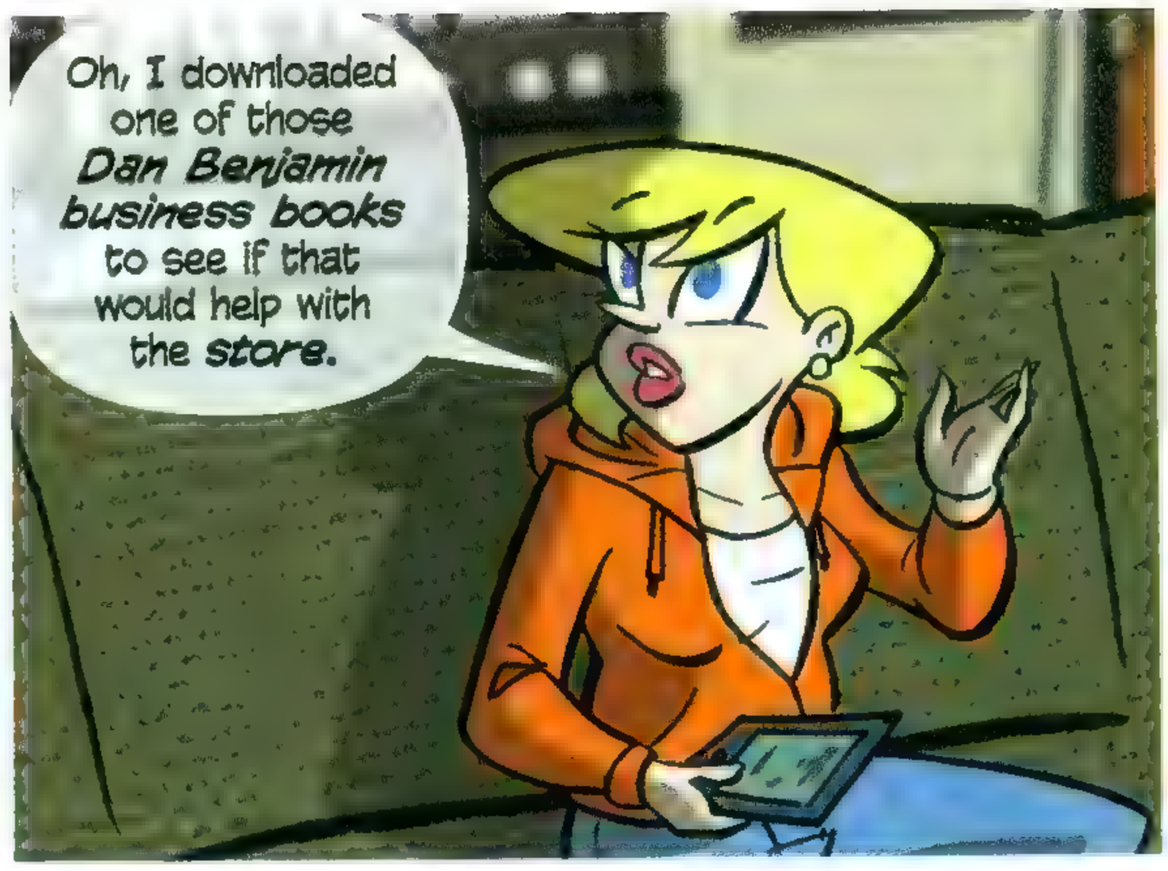
You know, you're actually *quite good* with them.
Really?

Yes. It is good that *some wise soul* pushed you to take up the *teaching mantle.*

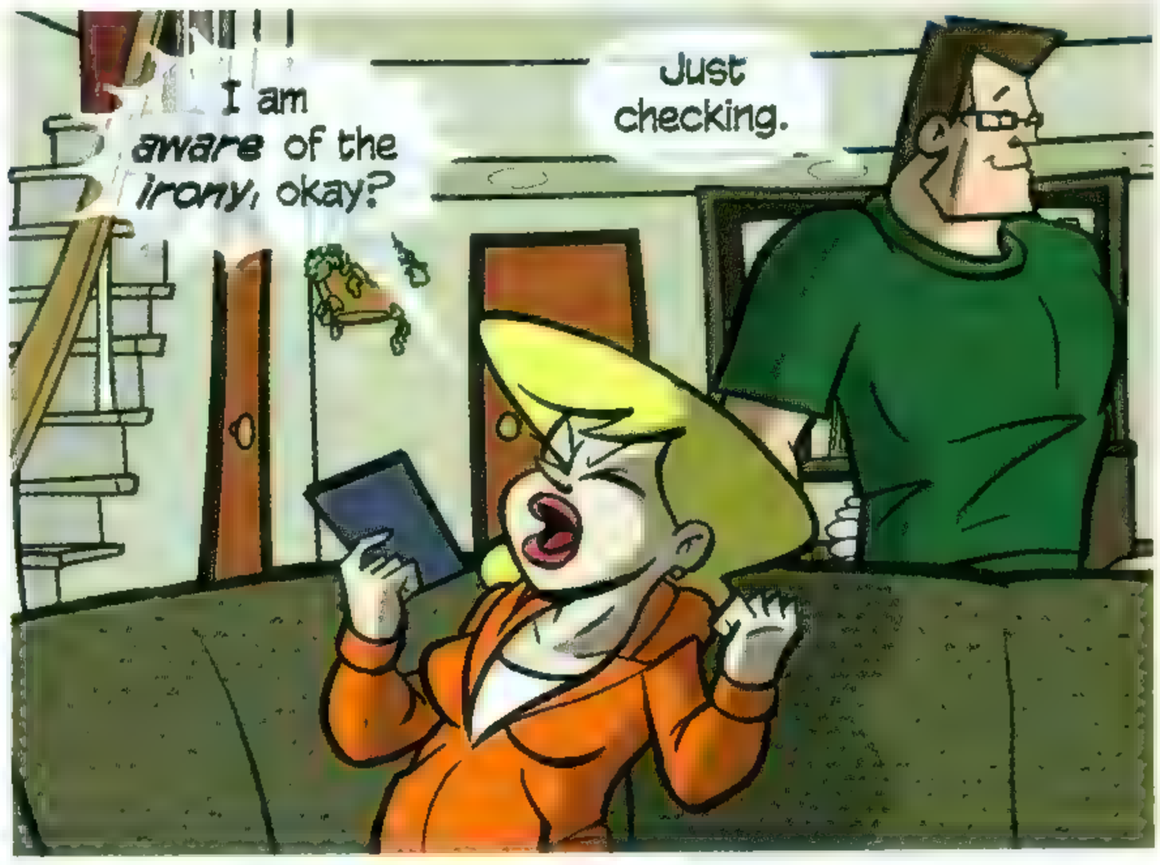
You're expecting me to say "*you were right.*"
Only if *you're* expecting *more* compliments.

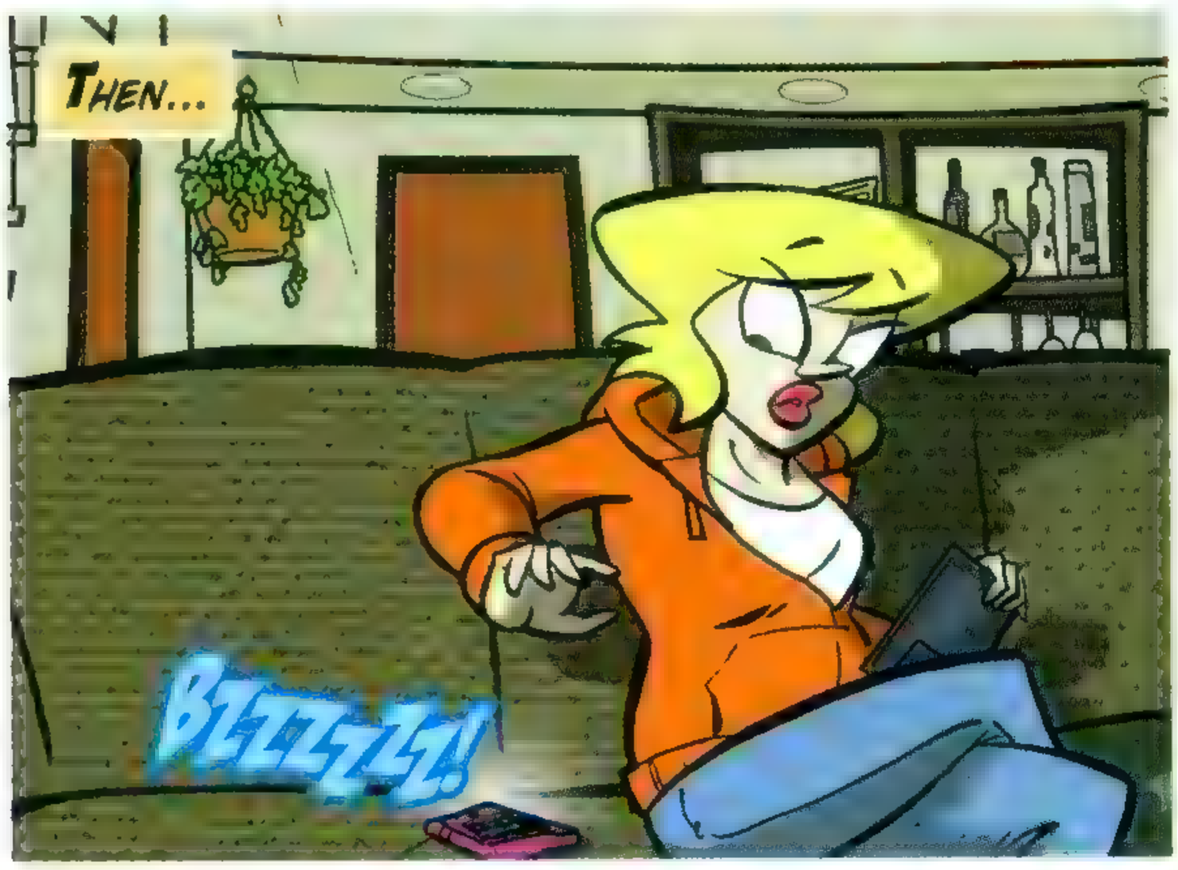
I *do* enjoy these little *mental chess games,* Mrs. O'Longeran.
Why? I beat you in *those,* too.

LATER...
Abby, I'm going to start painting the *nursery* and--
--hey, what are *you* doing?


Oh, I downloaded one of those *Dan Benjamin business books* to see if that would help with the *store*.

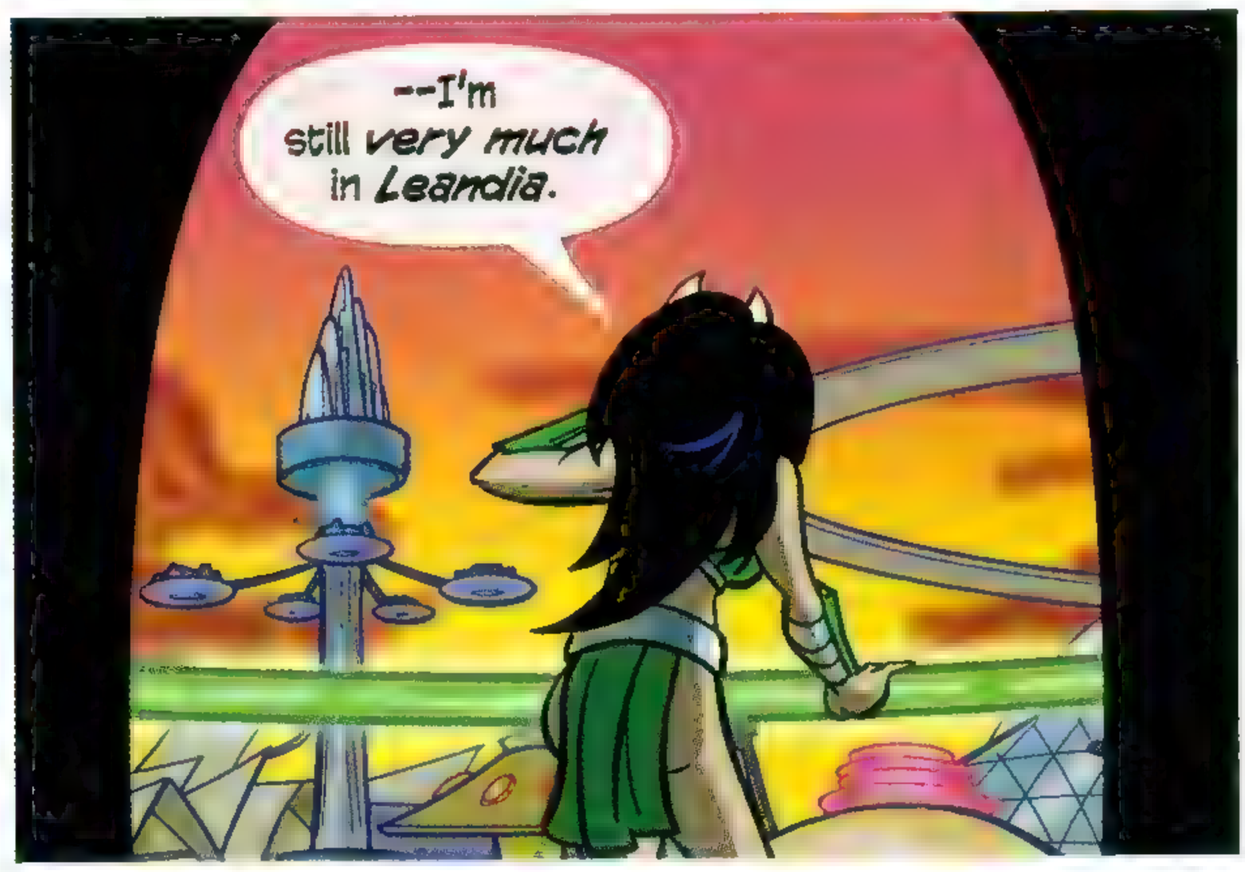
Yes, but you *downloaded* it--
Well, I *didn't* have it in the *store*.
--onto my *e-reader*.


I am *aware* of the *irony*, okay?
Just checking.


THEN...
BZZZZZZ!

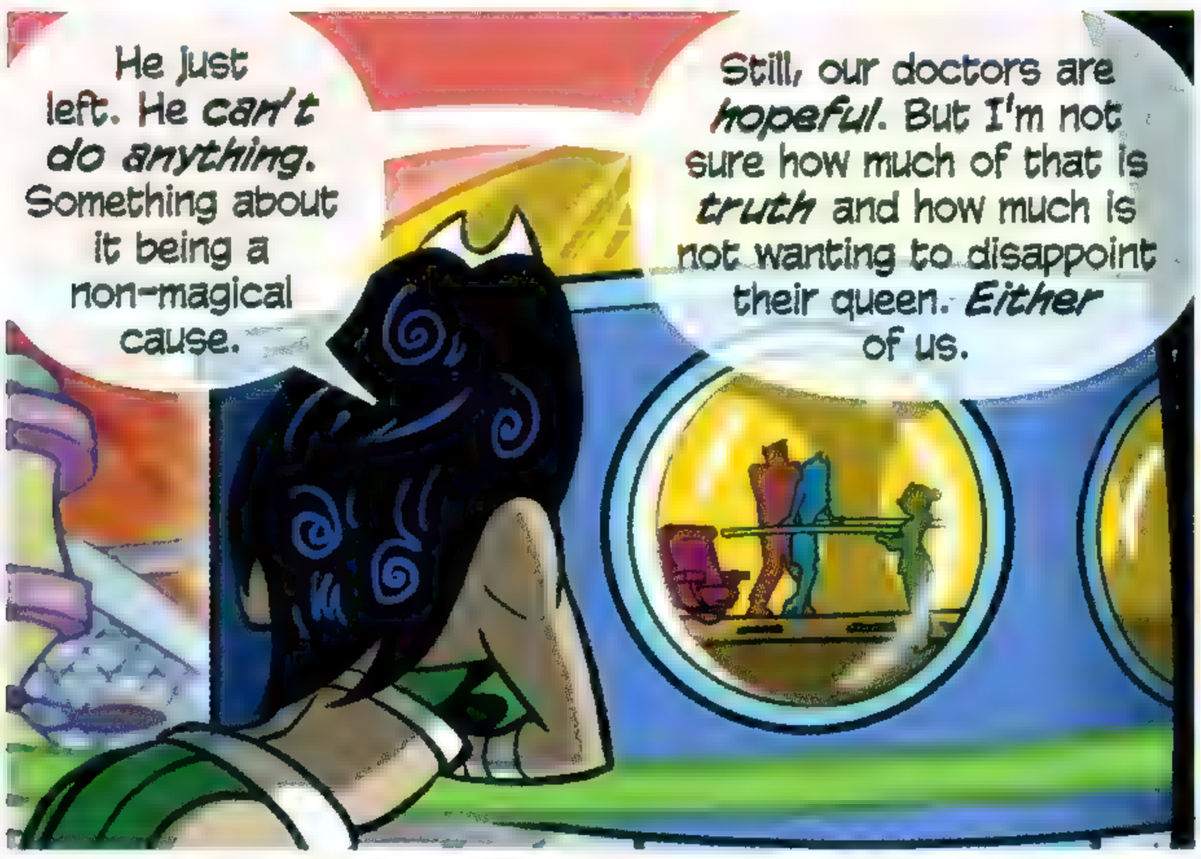
Hello?
Abby, it's *Amazonia*.

Oh hey, are you back on *Earth* yet?
No--

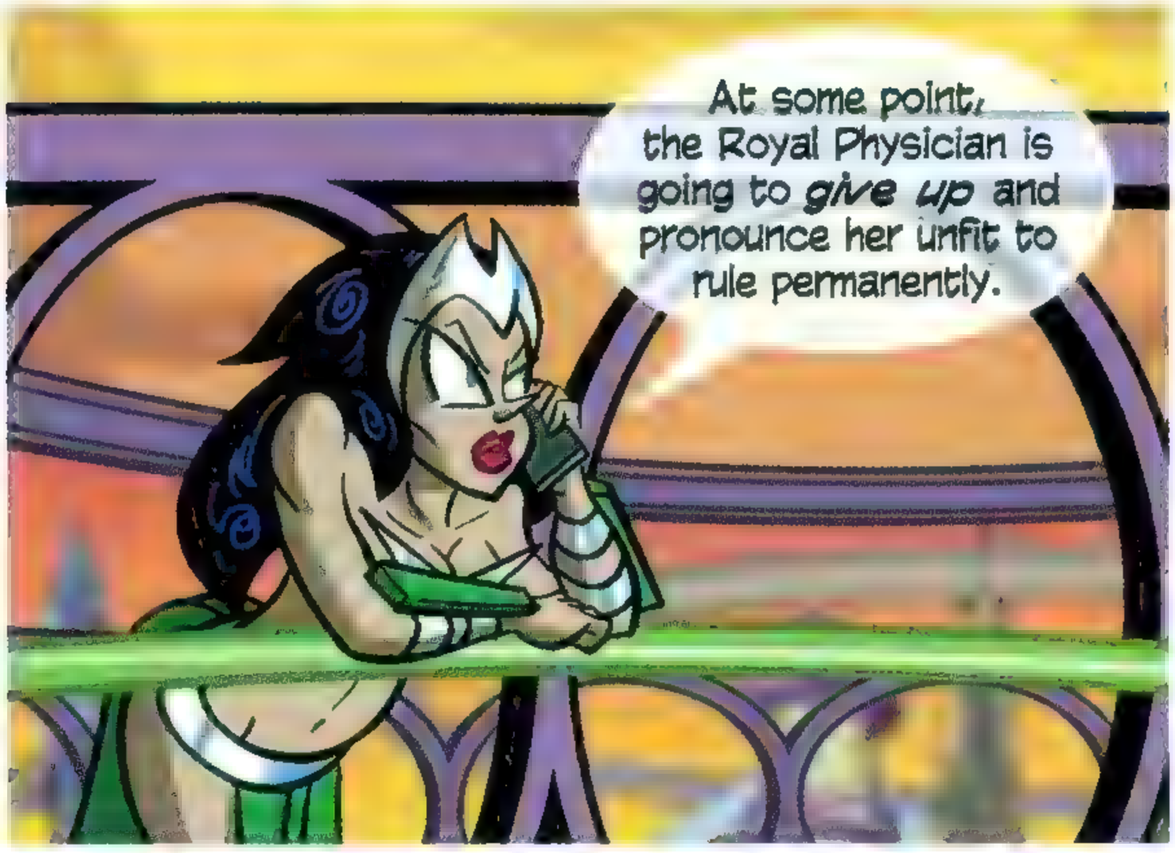

--I'm still *very much* in *Leandia*.

I just called to *chat*, since your rooftop isn't an option right now.
Am I *interrupting* anything?

Just me using my *unborn child* as an excuse to have a *snack*.
How's it going *there?* Mark said Paul suggested having *Doc Karma* see your mother.


He just left. He *can't do anything*. Something about it being a non-magical cause.
Still, our doctors are *hopeful*. But I'm not sure how much of that is *truth* and how much is not wanting to disappoint their queen. *Either* of us.

I'm *really* worried, Abby.


At some point, the Royal Physician is going to *give up* and pronounce her unfit to rule permanently.

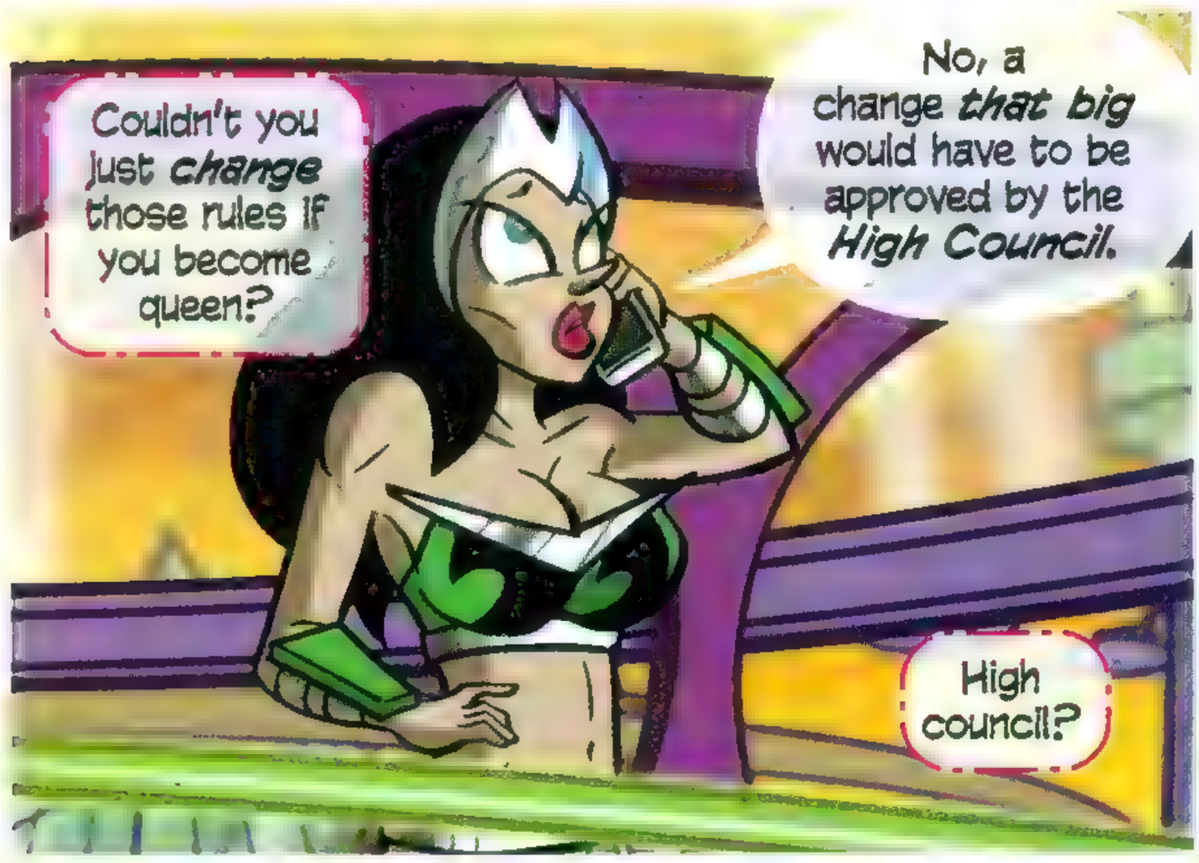
And, as much as I love my *family* and my *people*, I do *not* want to be stuck here.
Well, I hope she makes a *full recovery*. She seemed pretty spry when I met her.

How *old* is your mom, anyway?
Oh, she's *still* pretty *young*. Only *one hundred eighty-six* or so.

Wait a minute! Just how old are *you?*

What are you going to do if you *do* become queen? *Abdicate?*
It's *not* that easy, Abby.

We don't take *kindly* to abdication here. If I give up my *crown*, I'm *banished* from Leandia... *forever*.
I love *Paul* and I love *Earth*, but to *never* see my family or home again--I *don't* think I can do that.


Couldn't you just *change* those rules if you become queen?
No, a change *that big* would have to be approved by the *High Council*.
High council?

Everything you know about *royalty* comes from *Disney princess movies*, doesn't it?
And *Game of Thrones*.

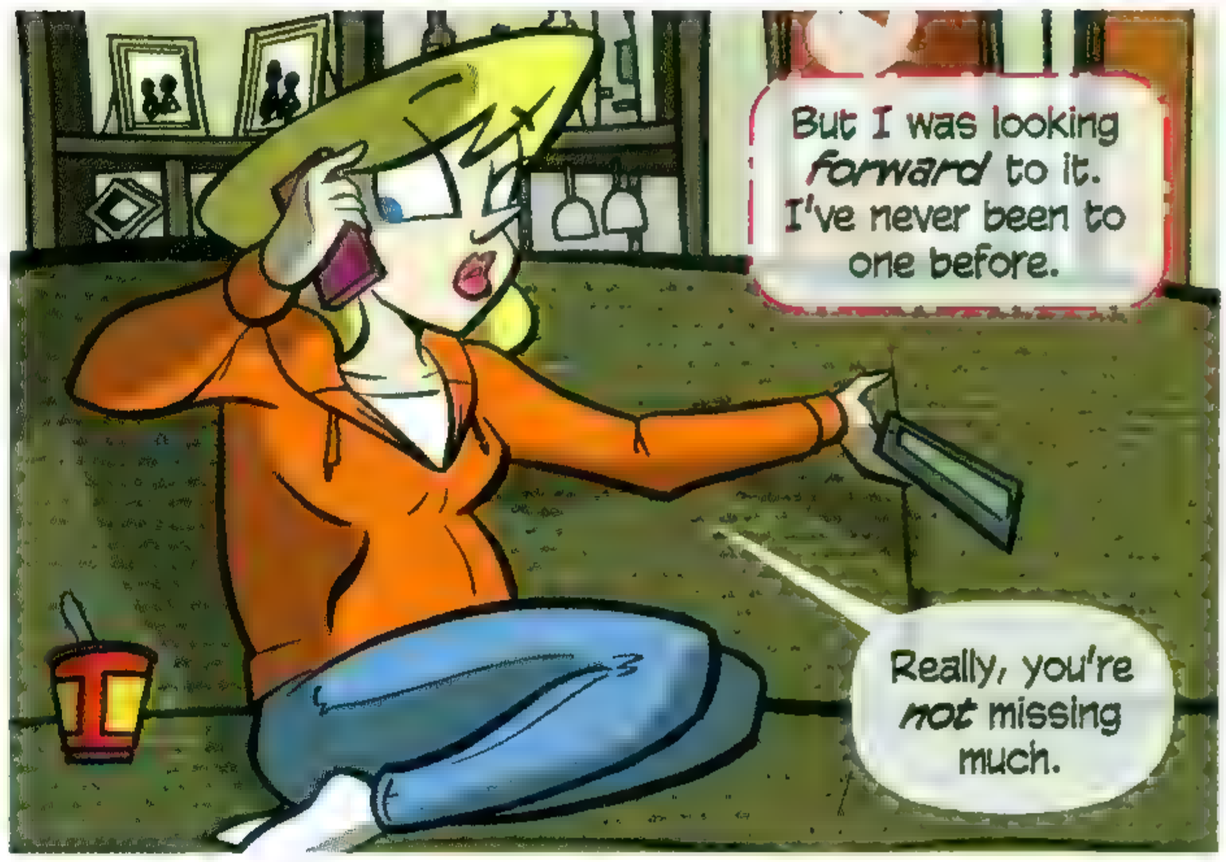
Wasn't this *always* going to happen, though? You were always due to succeed your mother, right? Did you have a plan?
I did. You've *met her*. Oriana.

Mother was supposed to file a *writ of succession* with the Council to make Oriana the next in line for the throne, not me.
But you know parents, she never *got around* to doing it. And so *I'm* here and Oriana is *there*.

Speaking of which, I do appreciate you helping her out. How *is* my sister doing?
Not bad. There have been a *couple* of bumps, like when she found out what she had to pay in *property tax*.

I think she was about to lead an *army* down to the county recorder's office.
Well, who *hasn't* wanted to do that?

Anyway, it's looking *less* and *less* likely that I'll be able to make it to your *baby shower* next month.
Don't worry about it, Zoe.


But I was looking *forward* to it. I've never been to one before.
Really, you're *not* missing much.

I've always found them to be *silly games*, and mothers telling horror stories and--just *ugh!*
Aren't there *presents*, too?
Heck, yeah--

--they're the only reason *I'm* showing up.

I *don't like this* Abby. I feel like everything's going to *change* soon, and superheroes *don't like change.*
What do you mean? You people are *always* changing.

Changing *into* things, maybe. But not *real change.*
If you think about it, we're *all about* the status quo.

We keep buildings *standing* and ships *afloat* and bad guys behind bars. We try to keep things *today* the way they were *yesterday.*

But you're *also* great at last-minute rescues.
Yeah, I could *definitely* use one of those right now.

It's just-- it was *all* going *so well*, you know?
I know.
I *just* moved in with Paul. We were building our life *together*.

Then, out of nowhere, *everything* gets *upended*.

And now, in a *couple of months*, my *whole life* could be different.

Oh, but listen to me, I'm talking about *my* life changes and not even asking about *yours*.
How are *you* doing?
Things are *good*.

In a couple of months everything's going to be very different *here*, too.
And I know of *one* super hero who's looking *forward* to *that* change.
16 WEEKS TO GO...

CHAPTER
5
ZATLER 42
CHARLIE BAILEY

WILLIS TO GO...

Wait, I just thought of something!
What?
If you where go for a month, you're going to go to the baby shower and meet me.
That's cool Auntie!
Sorry, it's kind of ok.
But the baby shower will be in Japan.
Wait a minute!
Hey, didn't you say something about hot-dogs, Chili Burgers?
Oh, since we watched movies, I didn't a hungry anymore.
Oh, sorry, my bad!

I CAN HAVE COFFEE!

Cool!

Flashback...
Later...

SAN FRANCISCO...

3 WEEKS TO GO...

CHAPTER 6
IT'S A-- MPHH!
RIGHT, LIKE WE'RE GOING TO TELL YOU ON THE COVER.
TAKE IT INSIDE, BUSTER.
TRIMBERZ '12

THE LANNA NA HOICHE MONASTERY...
Everyone raise your glasses and join me in congratulating--
--my apprentice, and the next in the line of Darkblades--
--hopefully many years from now, of course--
-- DAGGER!

It will be my privilege to *train* this man in his *noble duty.*
I hope to *honor* our *legacy,* sir.
I'm *sure* you will.

Hey, congratulations! You're now a *mentor.*
I know. It *still* doesn't feel quite real yet.

I just can't believe you finally *picked one.*
Well, not all of us can *breed* our successor, you know.

True. But *yours* won't need diapers.
Maybe. But I suspect we'll both have as many *sleepless nights.*

I hope there are *no* hard feelings, guys.
Not at all. You *really* deserve it, Grant.
And we're *staying* in the Order. So we'll *be there* when you need us.

We also *got you* a little something.
It's a *tradition* for the unpicked candidates to get something for the chosen. A reminder of their *calling.*

You *didn't* have to--
Wait, *really?*

A *tire iron?*
Not funny, people, not funny.
You were right, that *was* a better choice than the toy rocket.

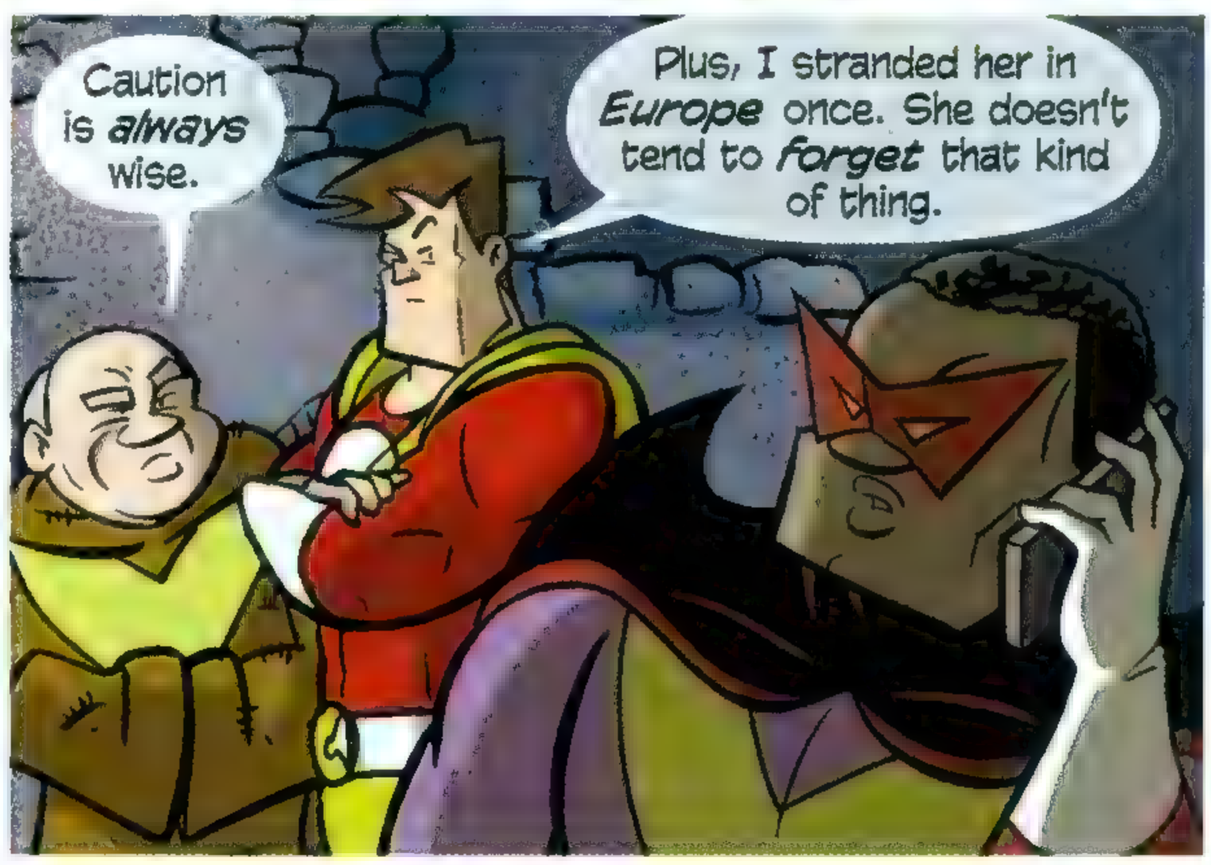
Well, Mrs. O'Lonergan, looks like you *finally* got through to him.
Well, *you* deserve some credit, *too*, Amazonia.

You're *good* for him, you know. He never even *considered* an apprentice until *you* came along.
He's a *good man*, but somehow you make him *better*.

Did you just--
Ah...

This champagne may be more *potent* than I thought.
Sure. *That's* it.

I'm sorry your *wife* couldn't make it, Crusader. I was looking *forward* to meeting her.
She sends her best, Brother Caden. She's clear to fly with *me*, but we're still trying to *minimize* that the *last month* of her pregnancy.


Caution is *always* wise.
Plus, I stranded her in *Europe* once. She doesn't tend to *forget* that kind of thing.

That was Chief Sims, Dagger. *The Quizzler* is threatening to release a cannister of *nerve gas* in the city unless we solve his *diabolical clues*.
Time to *go*.
Right, boss.

Looks like tonight is a *school night*.
Yeah.
Seems like they're *all* school nights.

2 WEEKS TO GO
Ankles bothering you again?
Only *always.*
How was the *party?*

It was *good.* Paul even *choked up* a couple of times.
Oh, I *wish* I could have seen that.
I think Mrs. O may have grabbed a *picture.*

Everything was *great* until Paul and Grant had to run off to *work.*

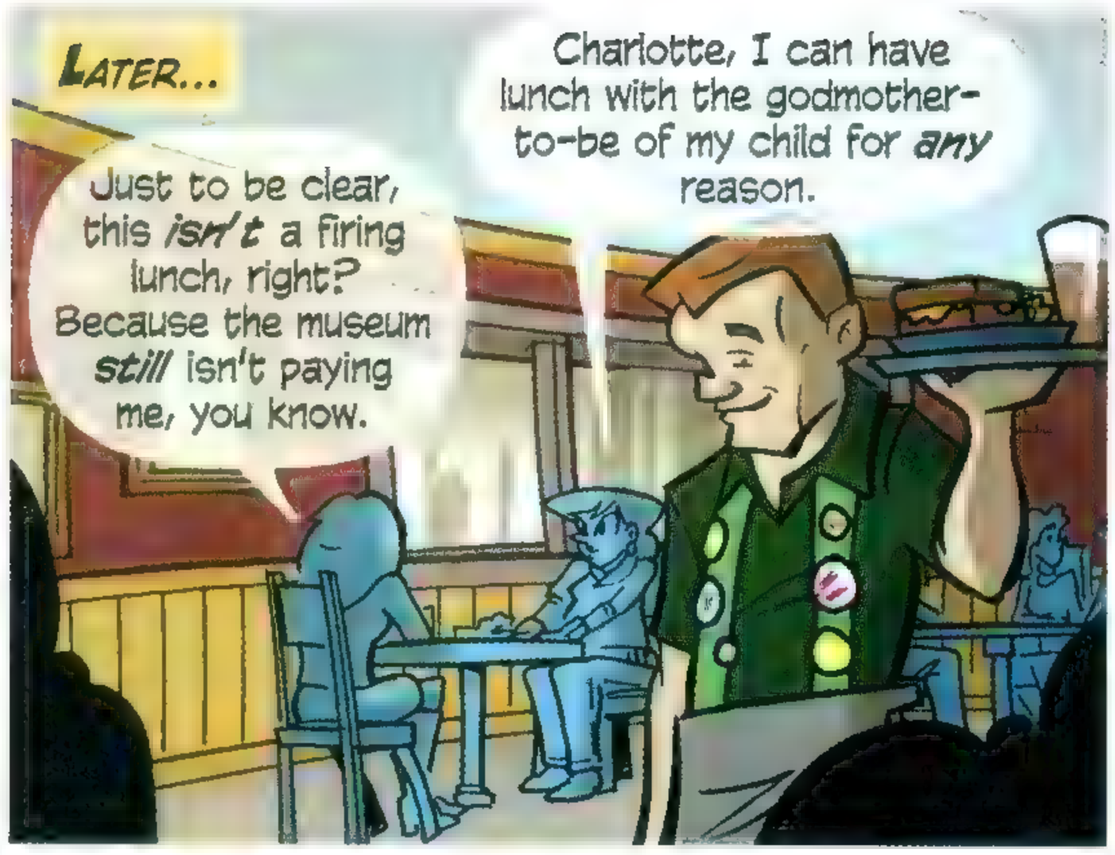
You guys don't get to *close* a lot of places down, do you?
We *do* order a lot more desserts than we ever get to *eat.*

So, what have *you* been working on?
An idea for *shoring up* the book-store.
It's kind of *bold,* isn't it?

Fortune favors the *bold.*
Fortune favors the *foolish.*
Either way, I think it *might work.* What do *you* think?

Seems like a *solid plan* to me. Your *numbers* certainly add up.
What? Getting *Charlotte* on board?
Good. Now comes the *hard part.*

Oof! No, getting *up.*
I am *so* ready to have this baby out of me.


LATER...
Charlotte, I can have lunch with the godmother-to-be of my child for *any* reason.
Just to be clear, this *isn't* a firing lunch, right? Because the museum *still* isn't paying me, you know.

That said, I *do* want to talk to you about the bookstore. I *think* I've figured out *what to do.*
I went over the numbers. Sales have been *down* across the board with *one* exception: the *art books* and collections you've been selling.

So, I want to refocus on *art books* and expand into the *empty storefront* next to us, making that into a *gallery.*
Now, I'm going to need to rely on *you* for that *more* than usual. Which means--

--I want you to *buy into the store* and be my *partner.*
What?

Are you *serious?*
I *am.* I'm *not* going to have as much time to give to the store once the baby comes, so I want someone with a *vested interest* to help with this transition.

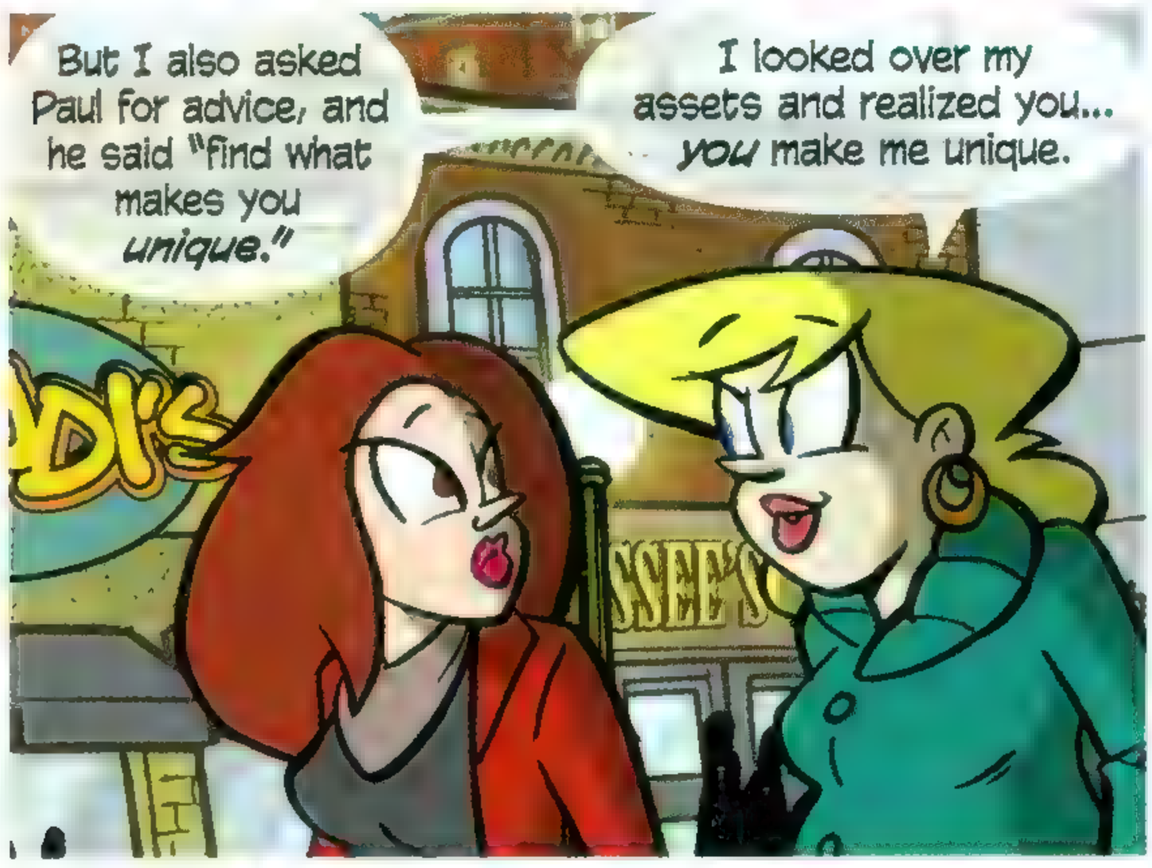
Abby, I don't have a ton of *disposable income* to buy in--
I *know.* But we can do a *work equity swap.* Basically, instead of cash *up front,* it'd be *work* over the next few years.
Assuming you're *in,* of course.

Yes! Absolutely, I'm in.
Excellent!

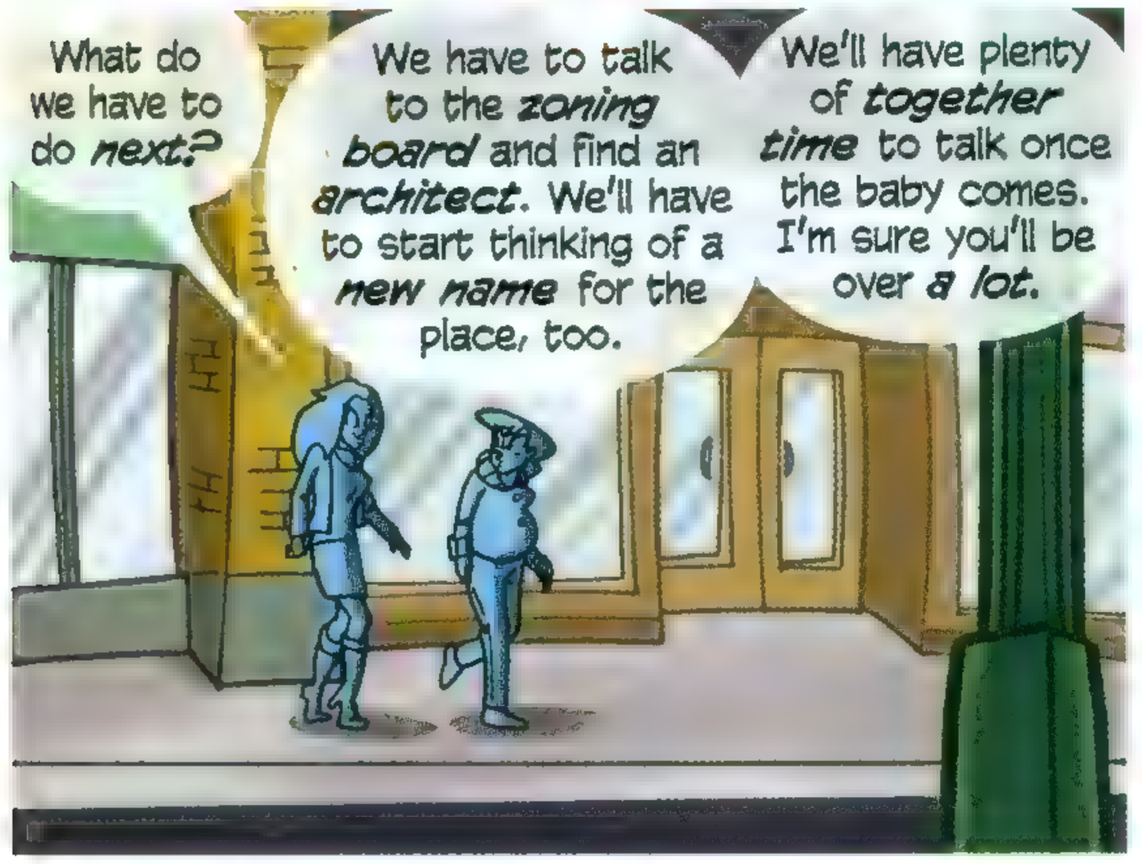
Ladies, here's the *check.* There's no rush--
Oh, you can just give it to *her.*
Your buy-in starts *today,* sister.

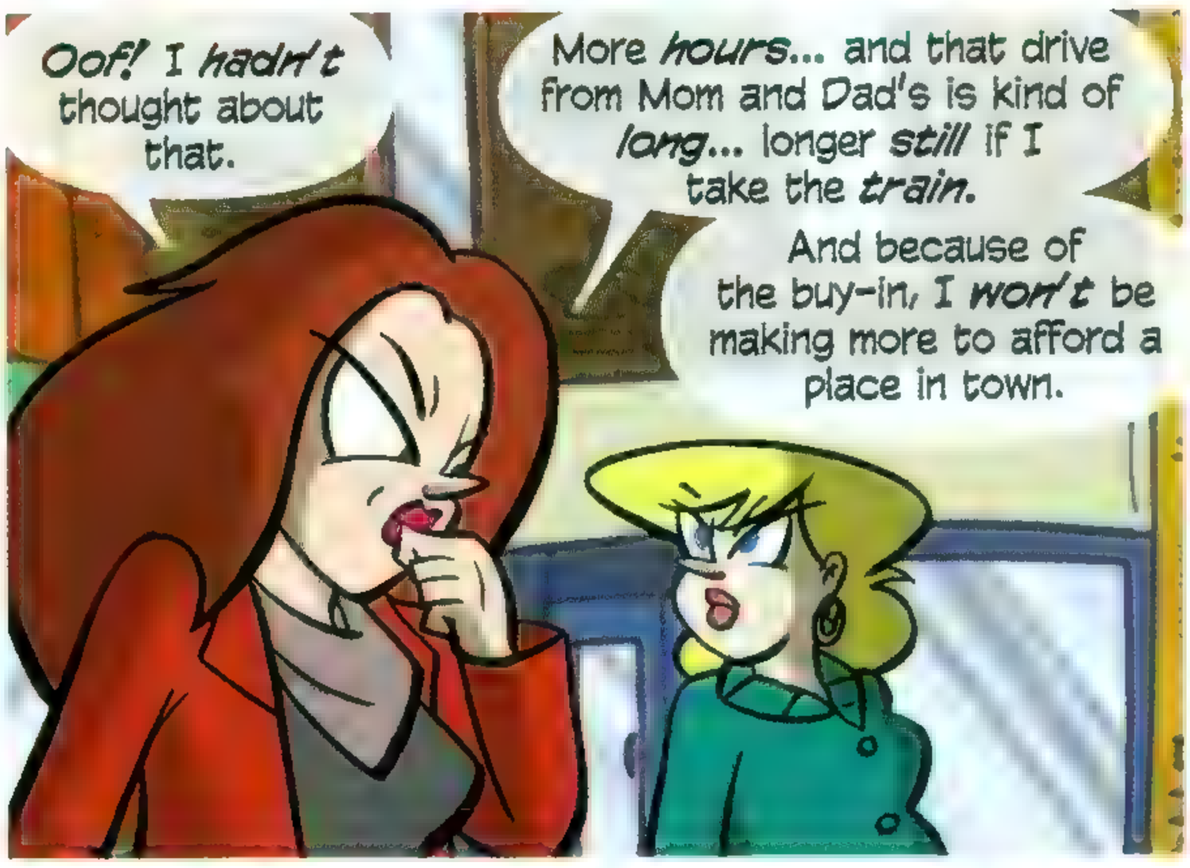
LATER...
--and we could have art classes in the gallery between shows. Maybe one of those cool Drink and Draws.
See, this is exactly why I wanted you on board.

What made you think of doing this? Just the sales figures?
Partially. But it also makes sense. Those art books are always going out of print, and they don't look as good on an e-reader.


But I also asked Paul for advice, and he said "find what makes you unique."
I looked over my assets and realized you... you make me unique.

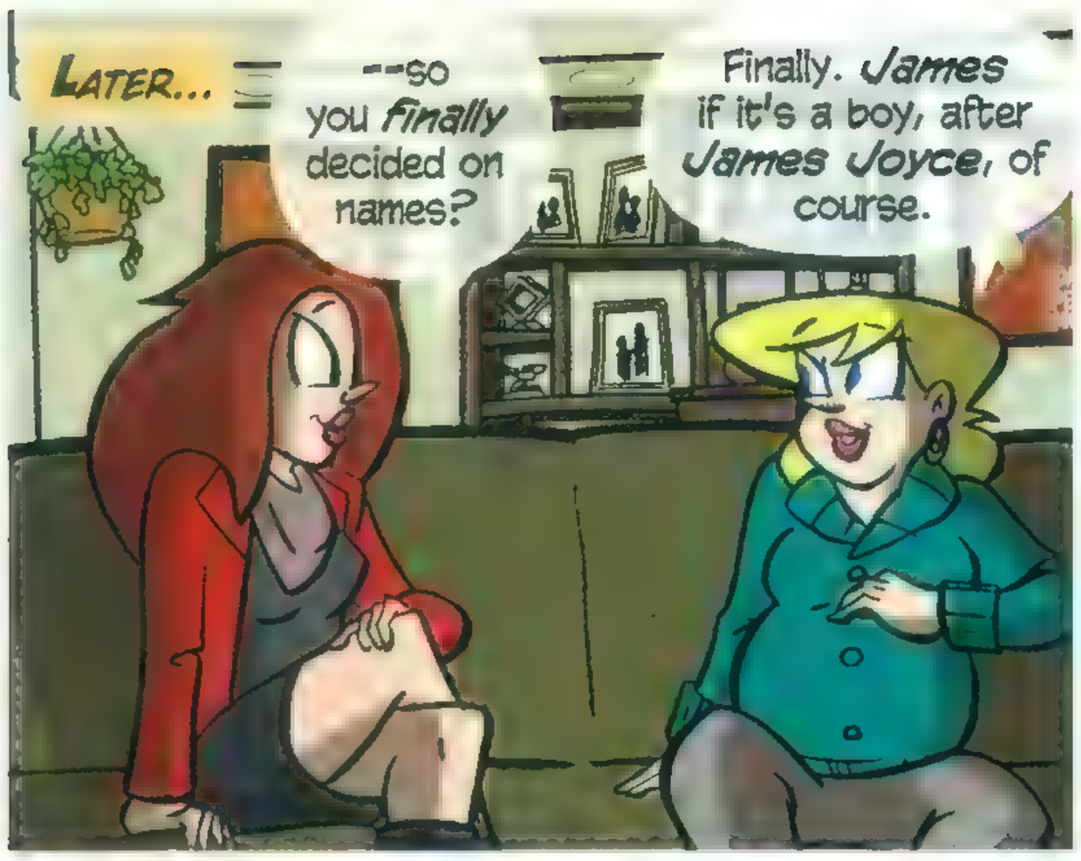
So I'm one of your assets?
When you're not being a pain in them.


What do we have to do next?
We have to talk to the zoning board and find an architect. We'll have to start thinking of a new name for the place, too.
We'll have plenty of together time to talk once the baby comes. I'm sure you'll be over a lot.


Oof! I hadn't thought about that.
More hours... and that drive from Mom and Dad's is kind of long... longer still if I take the train.
And because of the buy-in, I won't be making more to afford a place in town.

I may have to reconsider babysitting as much, unless you know of someone with an apartment building...
Really? You're trying to add a place to live to this deal using your babysitting services as leverage?

I have chosen my new partner well.
I learned from the best.


LATER...
--so you *finally* decided on names?
Finally. *James* if it's a boy, after *James Joyce*, of course.

ELSEWHERE...
--after *Captain Kirk.* Nice.
You *know it!* Starfleet's greatest captain--
--and the only person to *ever* beat the *no-win scenario.*

And if it's a *girl?*
Well, it took us so long to agree on James that we decided *Jamie* if it's a girl.

Really? For the *Bionic Woman?*
Yup. Now if I could just sell her on the middle name *"Danger..."* 10-year-old me would be ecstatic.

THEN...
Okay, that was the *last* one. We've now got a *cape* partnering with you from here on out.
Whenever Abby goes into labor, *they'll* cover for you.
Thanks. I appreciate it.

Oh, I looked over Abby's *business plan,* too. It's a *good* one. I knew she'd figure it out.
And it's nice that Charlotte can *step up* and *cover* for Abby more, too.

Very true. That *art history degree* I helped her get is paying off *nicely,* isn't it?
Yes, it *is.*

Of course, all this is *why* I sent her there.
What? *No way!* Not even you... *not even you!*
Yeah, but you kinda had to ask yourself, *didn't* you?

LATER...
So, when are you going to get to what's *bothering* you?
What?

You're *not* usually here this late. Clearly there's *something* on your mind.
You know me *too well,* Paul.

I've been thinking that when the baby comes, well--

--I might *retire* from being the Crusader.
What?

Retire? *Why? How?*
Well, as for *"how,"* I'd have Doc Karma *take away* my powers. Maybe see if he could give them to someone *else.*

But the *"why,"* that should be kind of obvious.
Look at us, Paul. It just took darn near an *act of God* to clear my schedule enough to be at my child's *birth.*
But my Dad--

--look, if I'm a *good man,* it's because my Dad was a *great father.*
He came home every day at *six.* We took a walk *every night.* He played *ball* with me on the weekends.
I want to be *that* for my son or daughter.

What I *don't* want to be is the world's most powerful *absentee dad.*

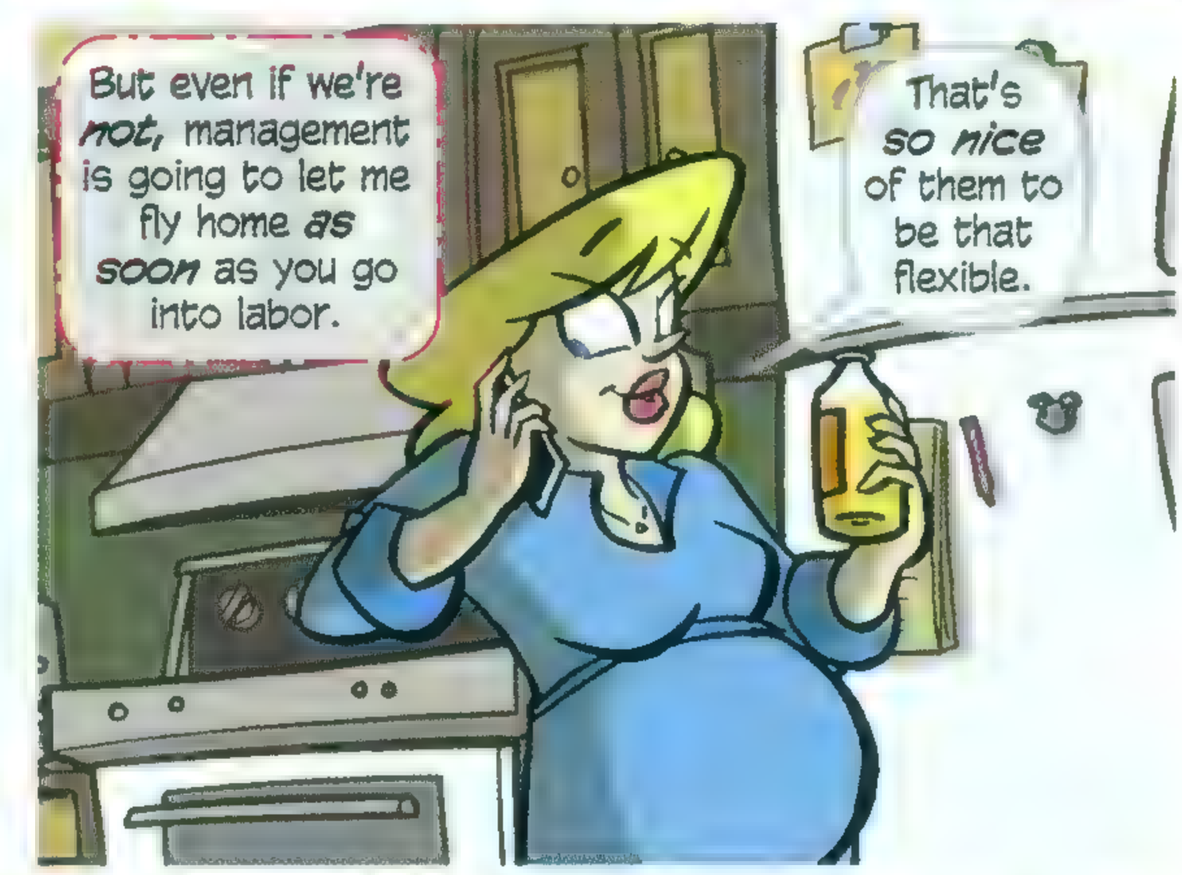
Wait, what would you do if your kid develops super powers, then?
Neither of my parents had powers.
We seemed to muddle through.

And what does Abby say about this?
I haven't told her about it yet. I wanted to really consider it.
And get your opinion, too.

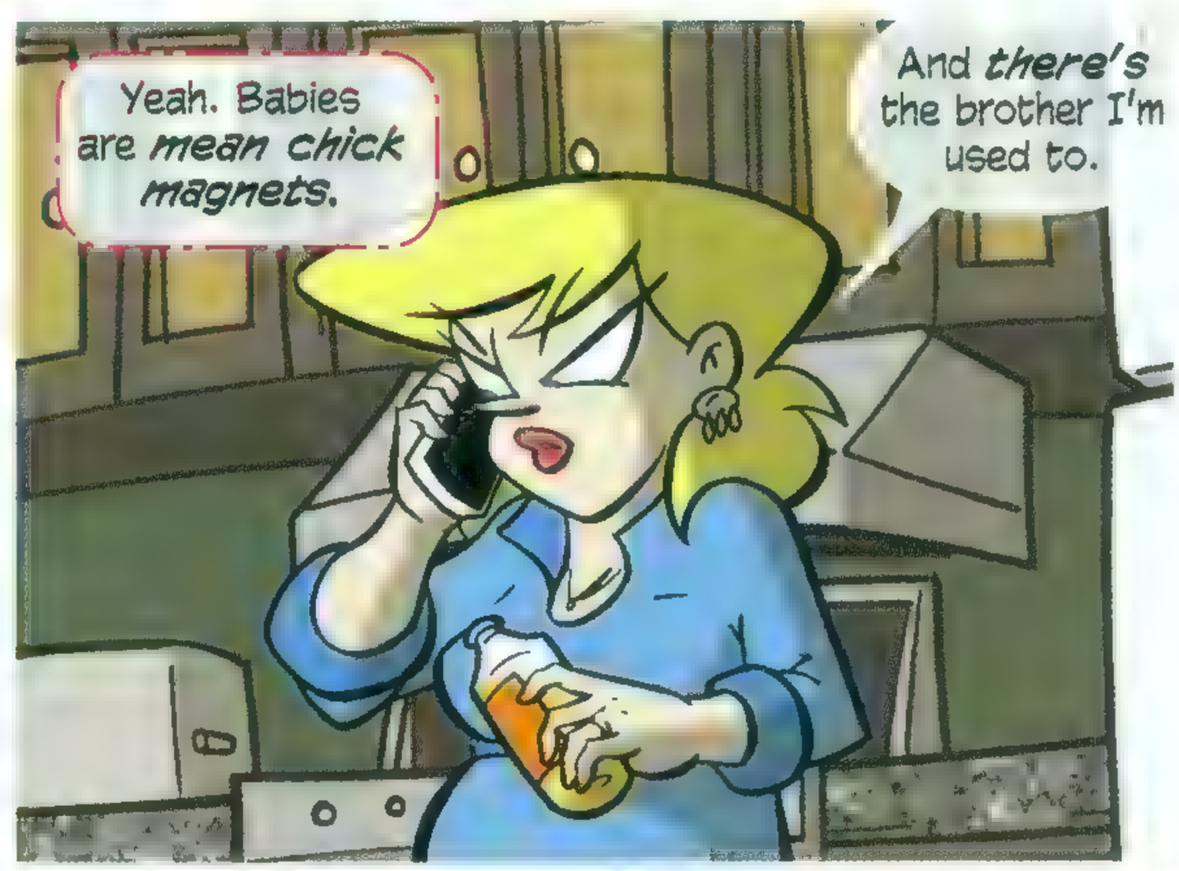
Wow. Mark, this is major. And I'm not sure I can help you.
I'll back whatever play you make all the way. But ultimately, this is about you and your child.
You must do what you feel is right.

I ask for advice and you give me Obi-Wan Kenobi?
Hey! He was the wisest character in either trilogy.
Sure. From a certain point of view.

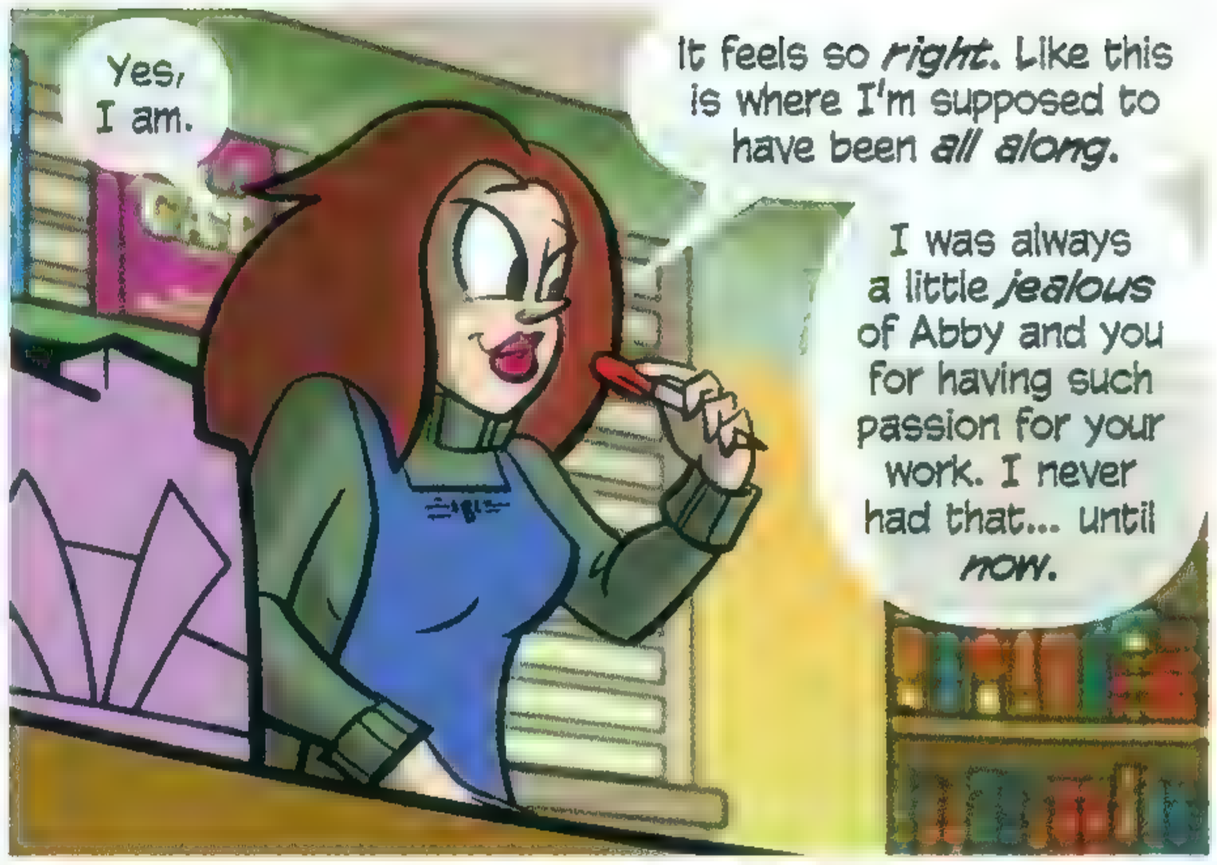
LIBERTY CITY...
My nephew is still hanging in there, right?
We've still got a couple of weeks before I'm due, Quincy.
Good. The team will be done with this road trip by then.

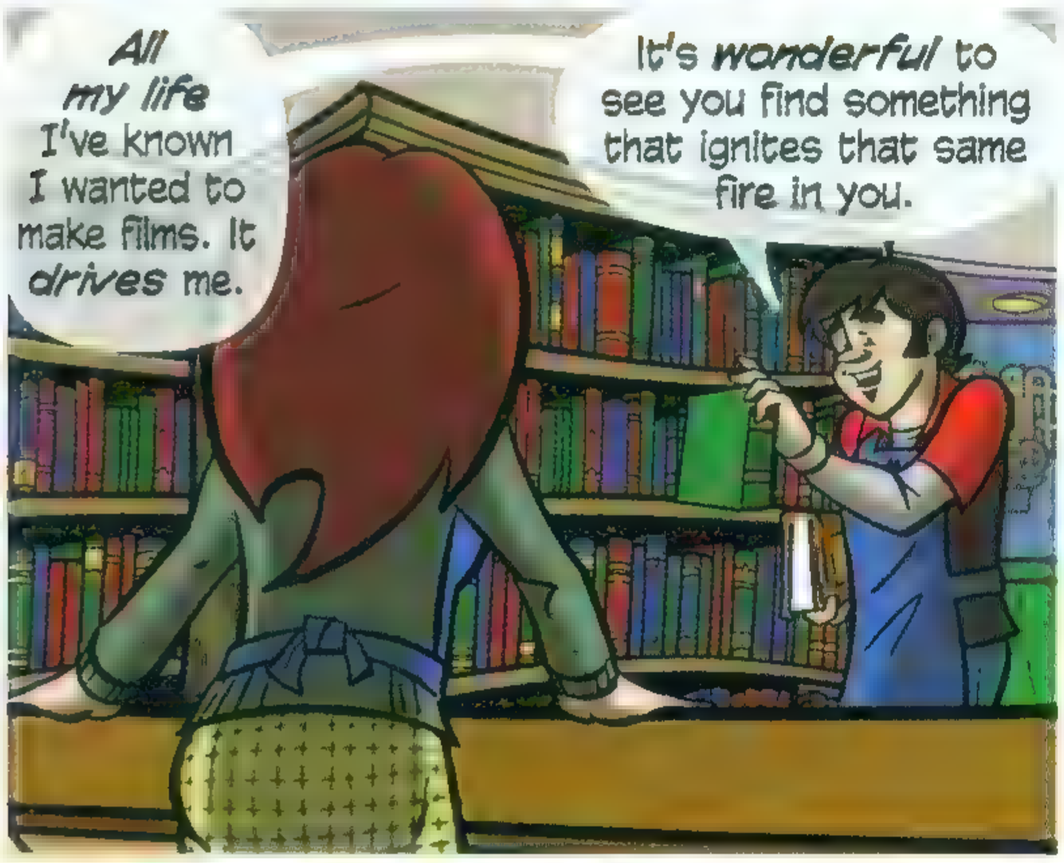

But even if we're not, management is going to let me fly home as soon as you go into labor.
That's so nice of them to be that flexible.

It's the start of our next generation. I want to be there for that...
Oh, and I definitely want to babysit from time to time, too. If that's okay.
You are being exceptionally sweet about this, you know.
Well, sure--

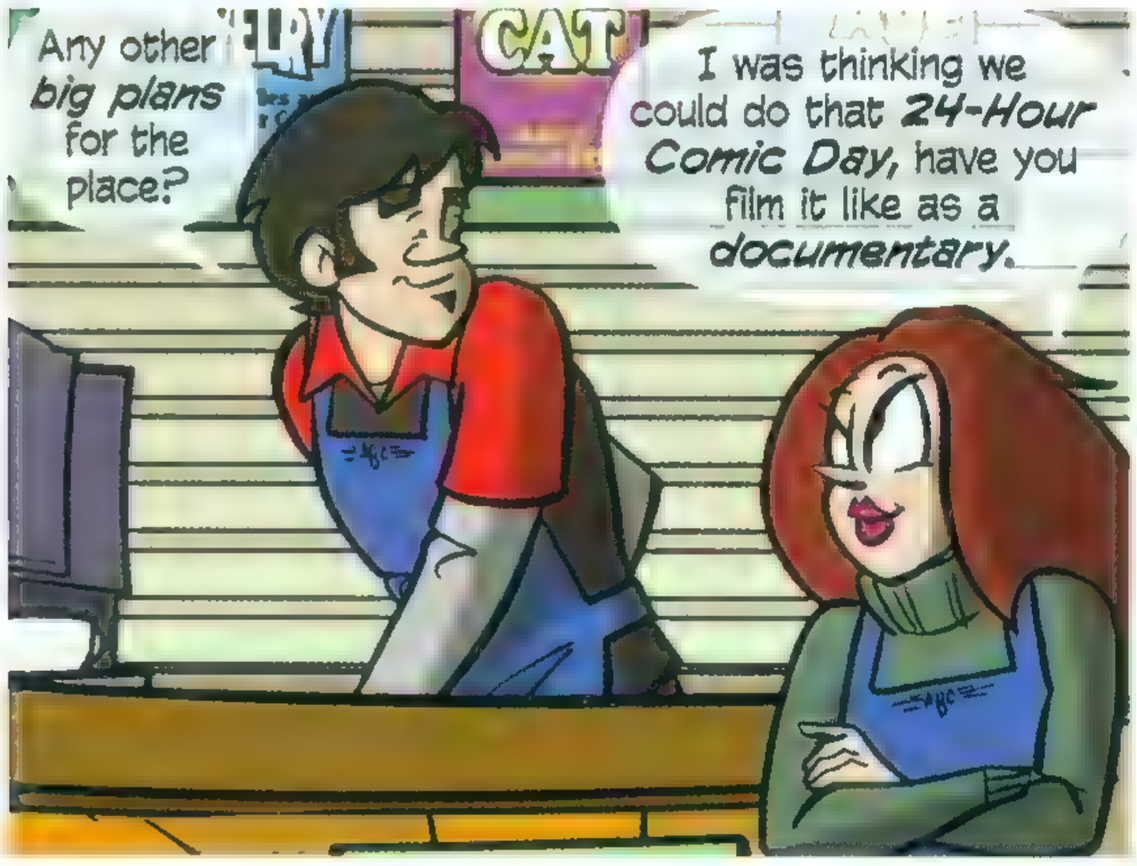

Yeah. Babies are mean chick magnets.
And there's the brother I'm used to.

LATER...
What about "Art, Books and Coffee"?
Ooh, I like that.
And we wouldn't have to change our aprons.
You're really excited about this, aren't you?


Yes, I am.
It feels so right. Like this is where I'm supposed to have been all along.
I was always a little jealous of Abby and you for having such passion for your work. I never had that... until now.


All my life I've known I wanted to make films. It drives me.
It's wonderful to see you find something that ignites that same fire in you.

Well, something other than the music of the Backstreet Boys.
Hey, Backstreet's back, all right?


Any other big plans for the place?
I was thinking we could do that 24-Hour Comic Day, have you film it like as a documentary.

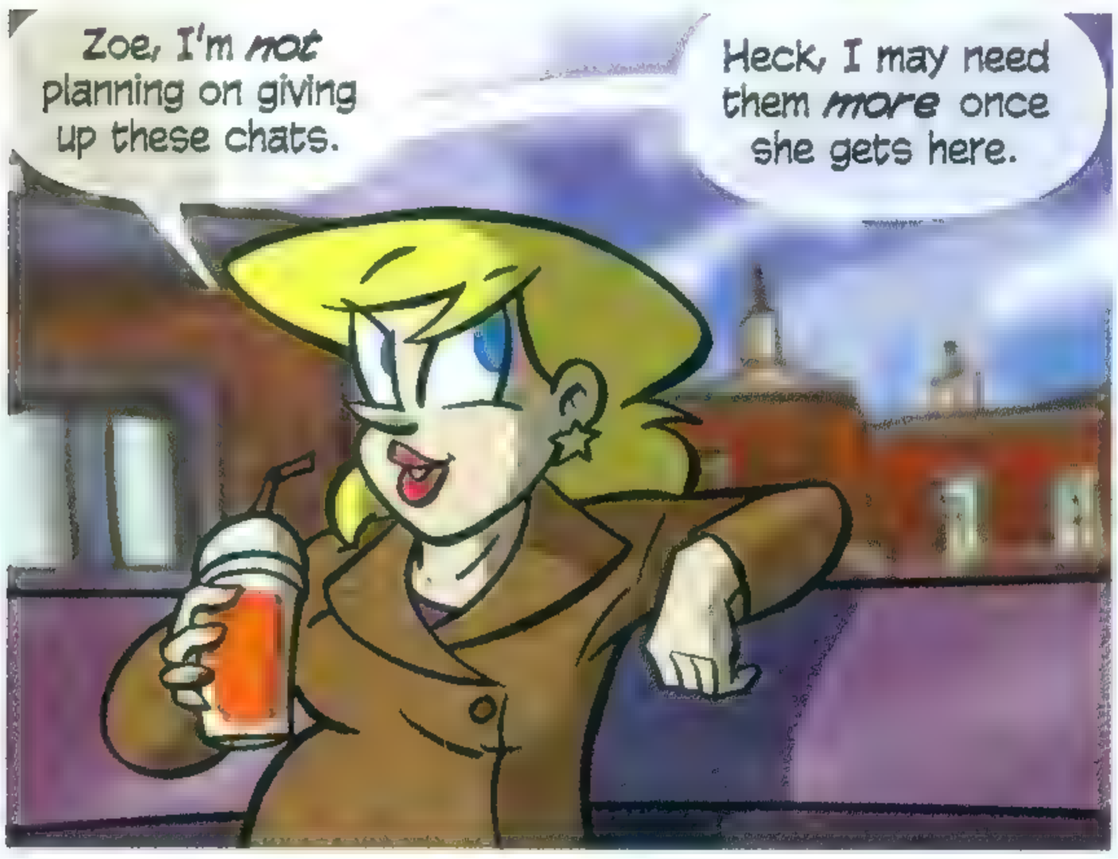
Oh, that'd be coo--
Hey! Is that your third cup? That costs us money, you know!

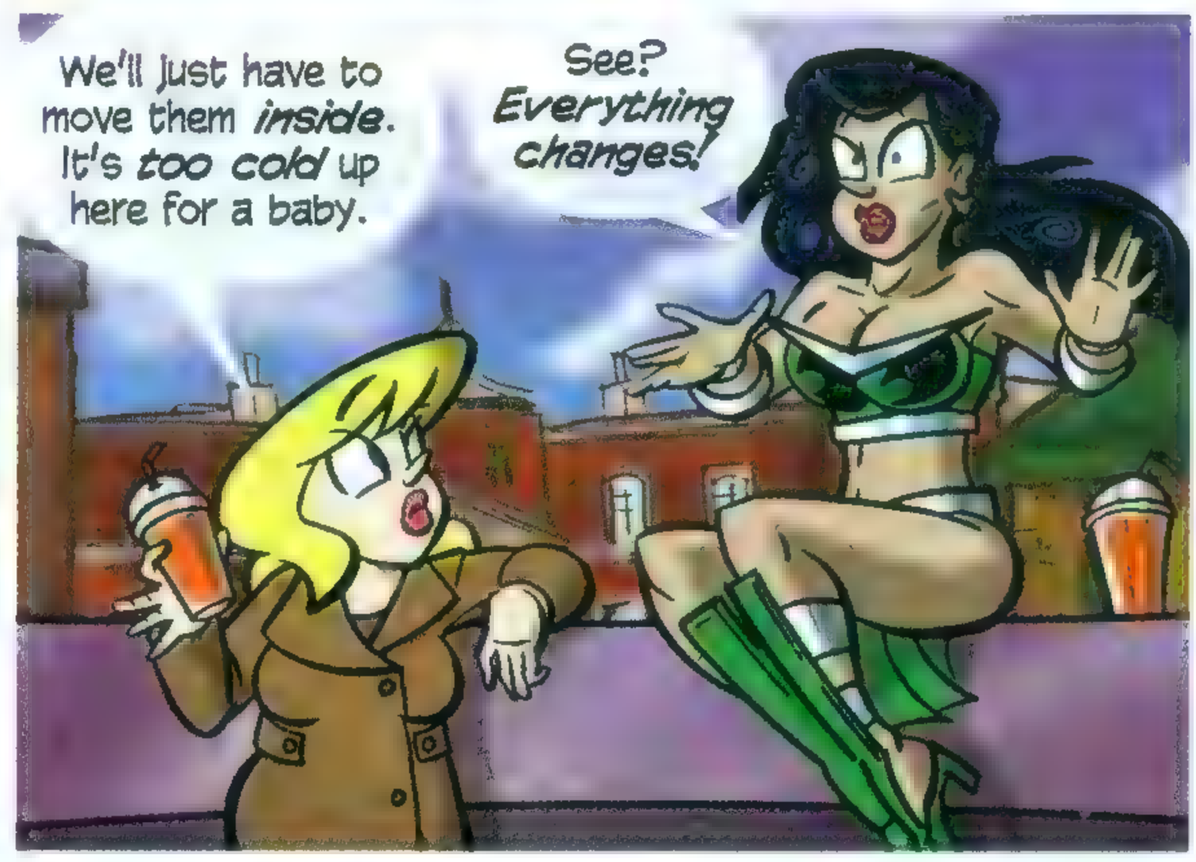
Sorry about that--
--Abby.

MEANWHILE...
What's wrong?
Nothing. I just suddenly felt the most intense feeling of satisfaction.

THE NEXT DAY...
We don't have too many of these *left*, do we?
What do you mean?

I have *sisters* with *children*, Abby. I *know* how this goes. The baby comes, and *everything* changes.

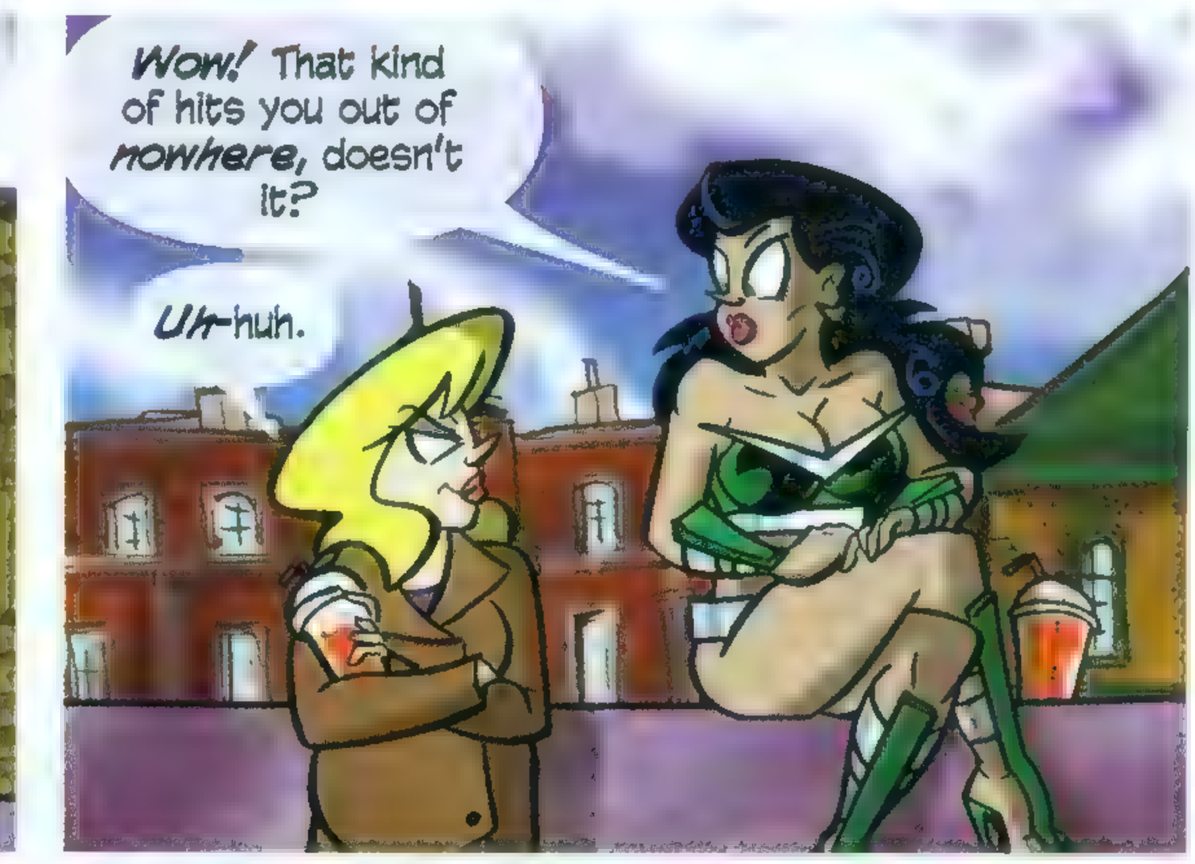

Zoe, I'm *not* planning on giving up these chats.
Heck, I may need them *more* once she gets here.


We'll just have to move them *inside*. It's *too cold* up here for a baby.
See? *Everything changes!*

You know, I do have a *husband* who can watch the baby, too.
That's *true*.

Maybe he and *Paul* can watch the little one *together*.
Hah! Just think, Paul with a *baby*...

Hmmmmm...


Wow! That kind of hits you out of *nowhere*, doesn't it?
Uh-huh.

6 DAYS TO GO...
Oh, Mark! I have a *baby gift* for you.

A *gift?* Because these look like the *forms* to create a 501(c3) organization.
They *are.* Zoe wants to create a charity for *stroke victims.* We need some *help.*
And how are *days* of *paperwork* a gift?

Because *instead* of paying you to do the work outright to serve as our tax consultant, we'd like to give you a small amount of *stock* in our companies.
If my math is right, in say, *18 years* those should be worth the cost... let's pull something at *random* here...
...oh, *four years of tuition* at an *Ivy League school.*

Thank you so much, Paul!
Um, and if Abby and I have *more* kids?
Plenty of good causes in the world, Mark.

Hey, guys!
Major Might! You're my *shadow* today, eh?
Good evening, Major. Did you--

GAH!
A *Screech Gate* just opened somewhere! I think *Lord Blackseed* is sending a battalion of *Chlorodrones* to Earth again.

Let's go stop an *invasion.*
Are you coming, Darkblade?
Hmm? Uh, no, I think I'll stay *here.* This is more *your* power level, anyway.

Never mind him. He doesn't like fighting a foe he *can't outthink.*
They're *plants!* How do you outthink *them?* They've got *no brain stem!*

AFTERWARD...
You were great, today, Major. You've come a long way since we first met.
Thank you, sir. That means more to me than you know.

It looks like we went crazy with a salad shooter here, doesn't it?
Yeah. Do we need to clean this up?
Fortunately not. The nice thing about Chlorodrones is they're biodegradable.

Now lettuce get out of here.
You're hard wired to be a father, aren't you, Crusader?

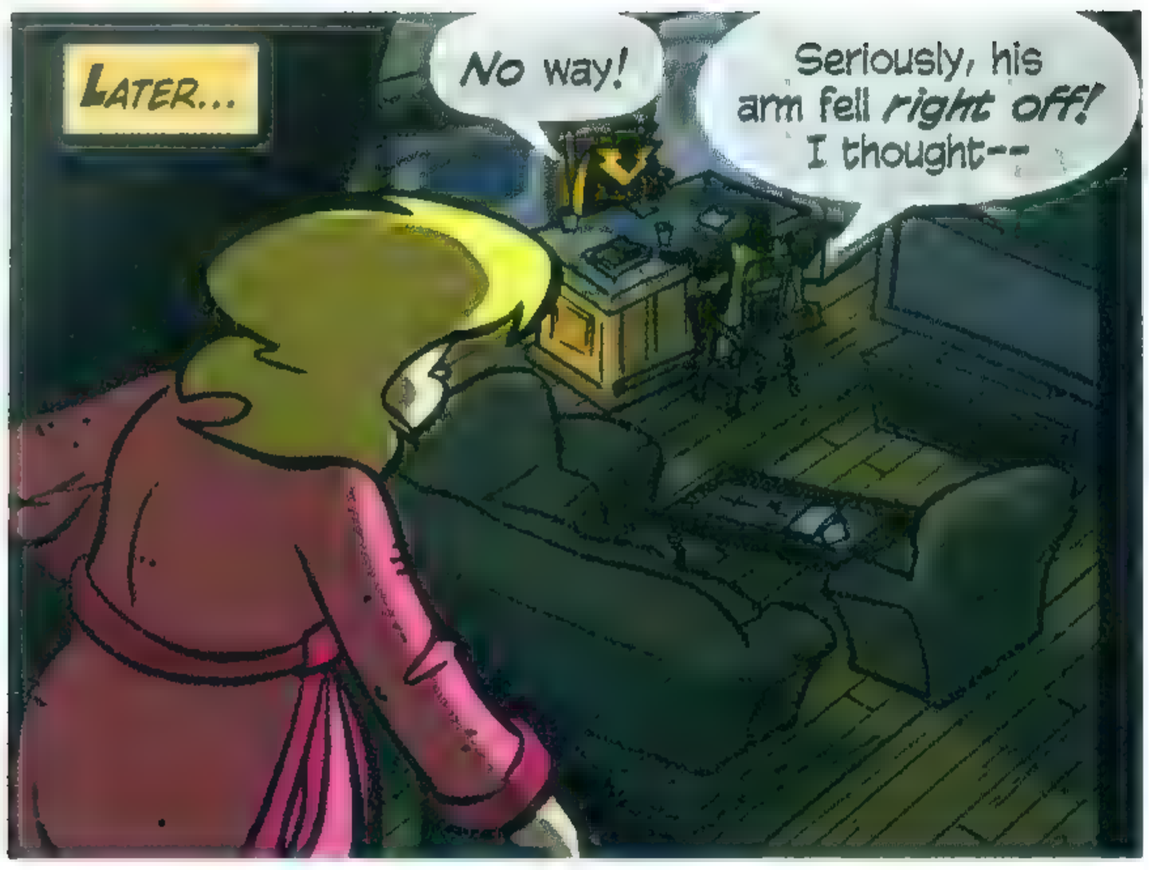
What makes you say that?
You've got the dad bad joke thing down cold.

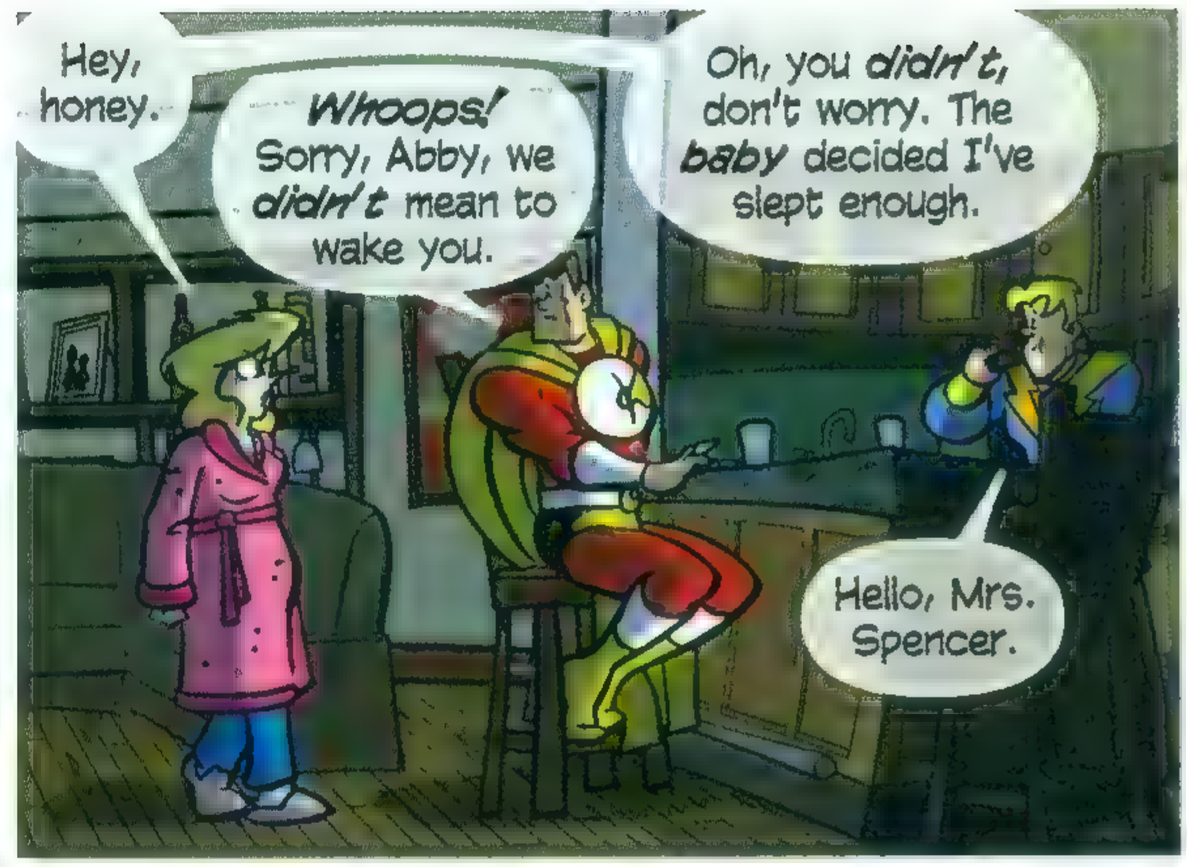
Crusader, Patti Englert, Action News 4. We have a few questions for you.
Gah! Reporters!

What's with the new bloodthirstiness? You and Major Might just slaughtered an alien invasion force.
No, we didn't.

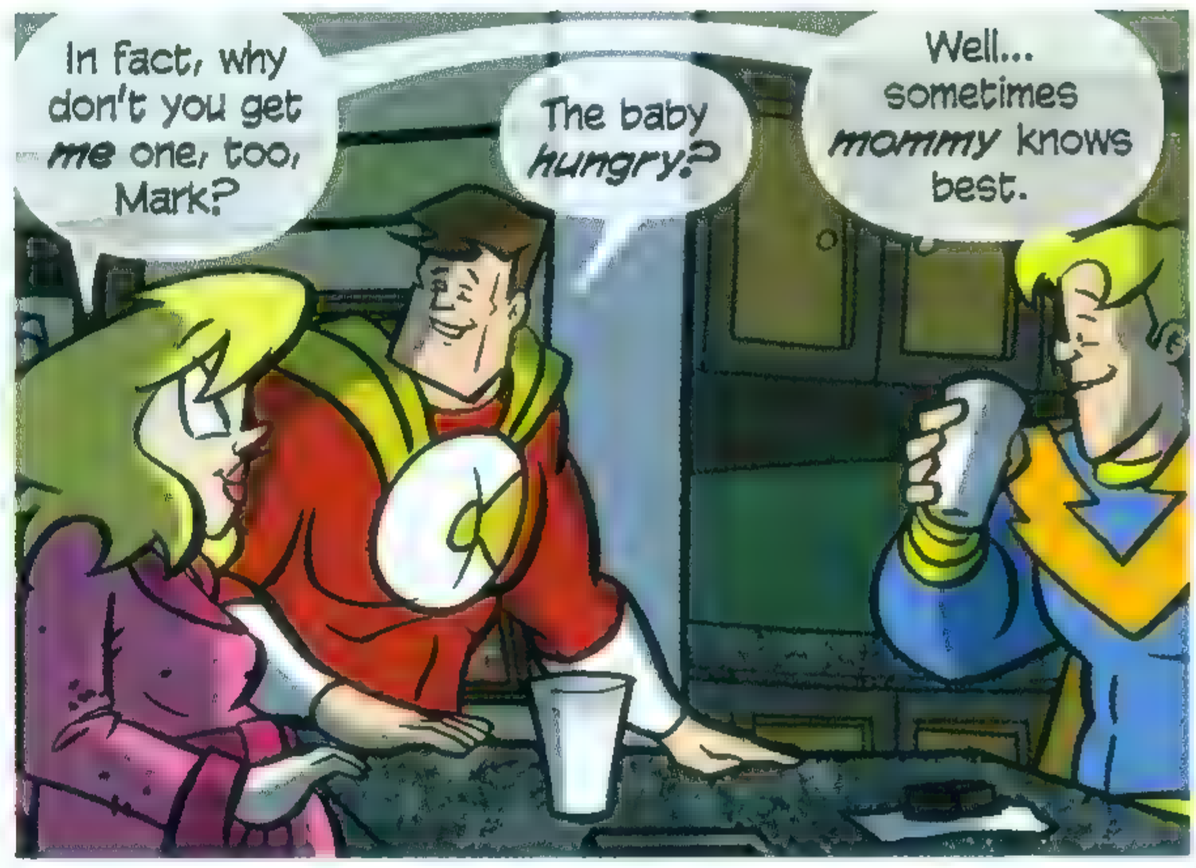
These Chlorodrones are like souped up Venus Flytraps. What we did was more like yard work.
What do you think we are, some kind of avenging death squad or something? C'mon, we're superheroes!

That's one of the reasons I hate reporters.
But, I thought your brother-in-law was one for a while.
And that's a second.


LATER...
No way!
Seriously, his arm fell right off! I thought--


Hey, honey.
Whoops! Sorry, Abby, we didn't mean to wake you.
Oh, you didn't, don't worry. The baby decided I've slept enough.
Hello, Mrs. Spencer.

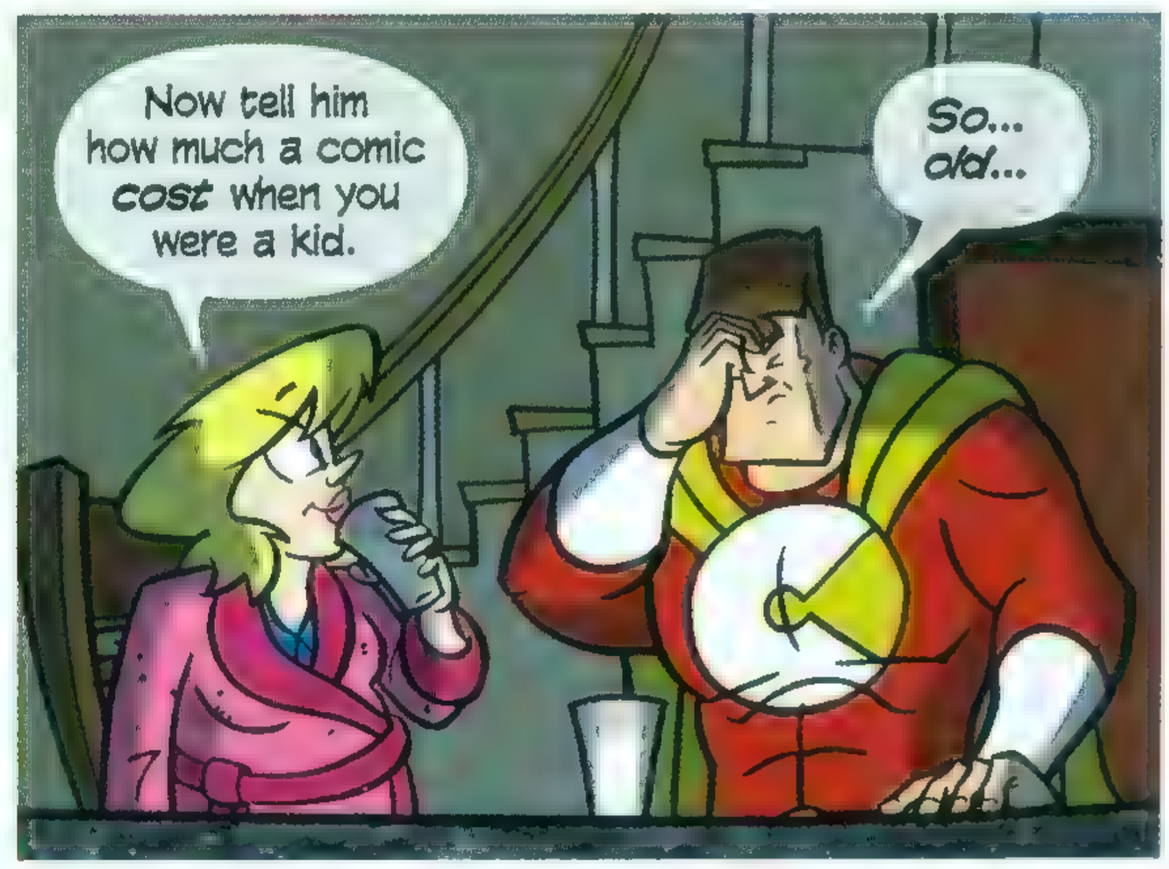
These brownies are great, by the way!
Thanks. Please, have another. Enjoy the largess of my nesting instinct!


In fact, why don't you get me one, too, Mark?
The baby hungry?
Well... sometimes mommy knows best.

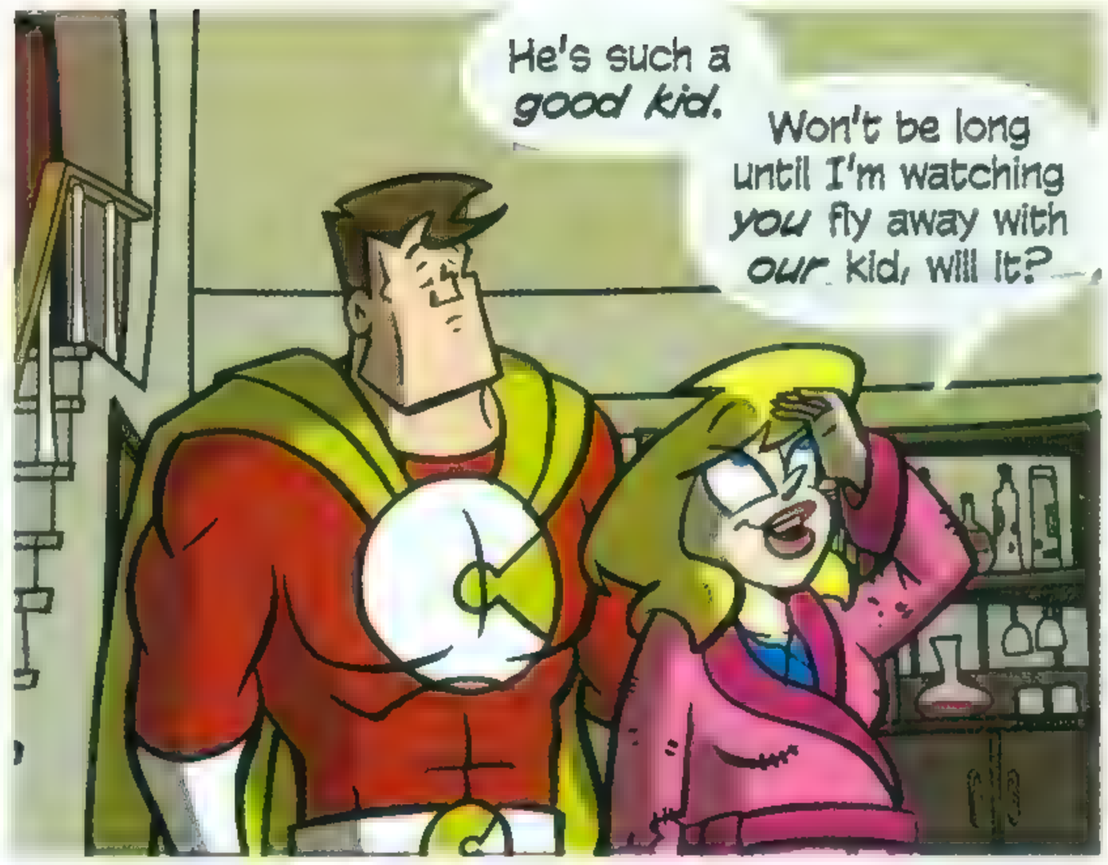
You look radiant, Mrs. Spencer. Pregnancy agrees with you.
Why, aren't you kind, Major.
Just the truth, ma'am.

Now, we do have one rule here. No super peeking at the baby. Boy or girl, we want a surprise.
No worries there. I'm afraid I don't have the Crusader's cool super-senses.
Maybe you should invest in some X-Ray Specs.

Those sound interesting. What are they?
Wait... you've never heard of... you know, from the back of the comics?
No, sir.


Now tell him how much a comic cost when you were a kid.
So... old...

LATER...
This was *great*. Thank you so much, and I'll see you *soon*.
And if anything happens *tonight*, Crusader, don't worry, I'm still on patrol.


He's such a *good kid*.
Won't be long until I'm watching *you* fly away with *our* kid, will it?

Abby, about that...
I've been thinking that *maybe*, for the good of our child--

--that I should *give up* my *powers* and being the Crusader.

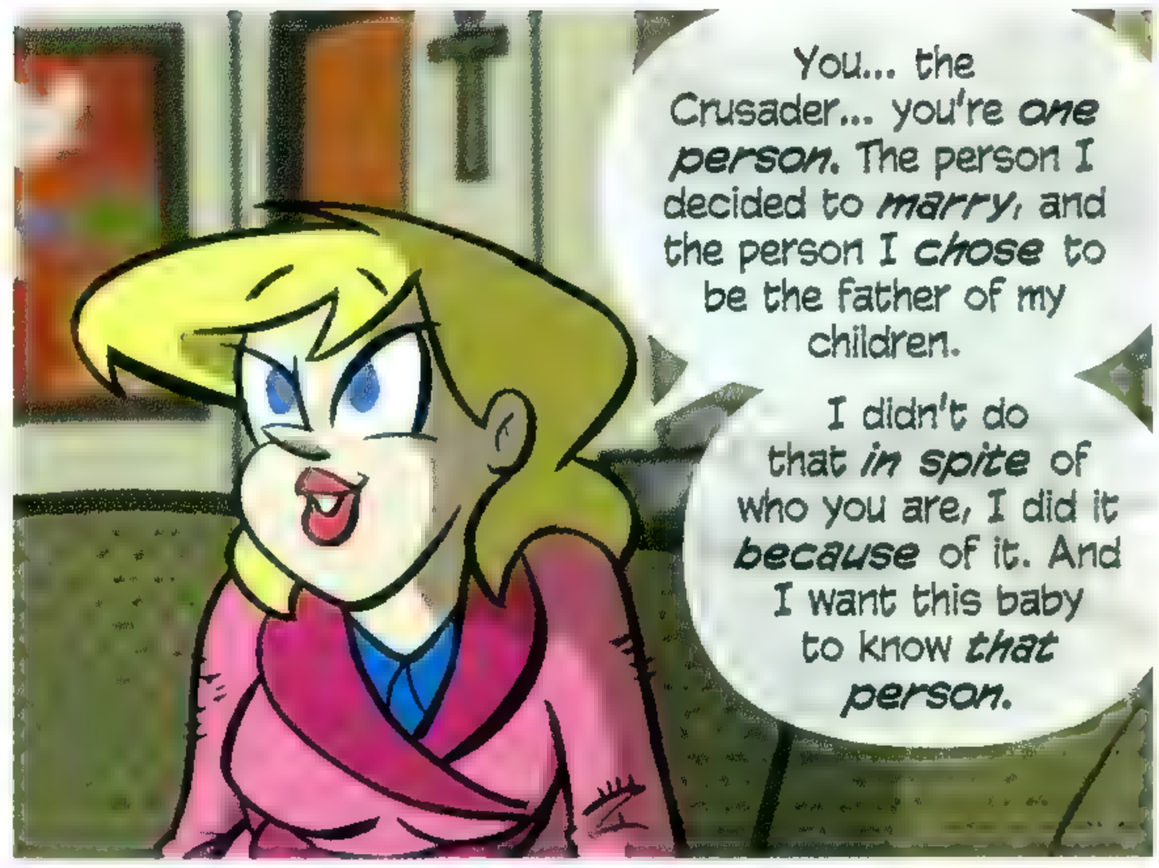
Mark, *what* makes you think that you should *quit* being the Crusader?

Abby, I'm *always* busy... *constantly* in danger...
How can I be a *good father* with all of that *constantly* demanding my attention as well?

You haven't *already* given up your powers or anything, have you?
No. I *wouldn't* do that without talking to you.
That's good to know--

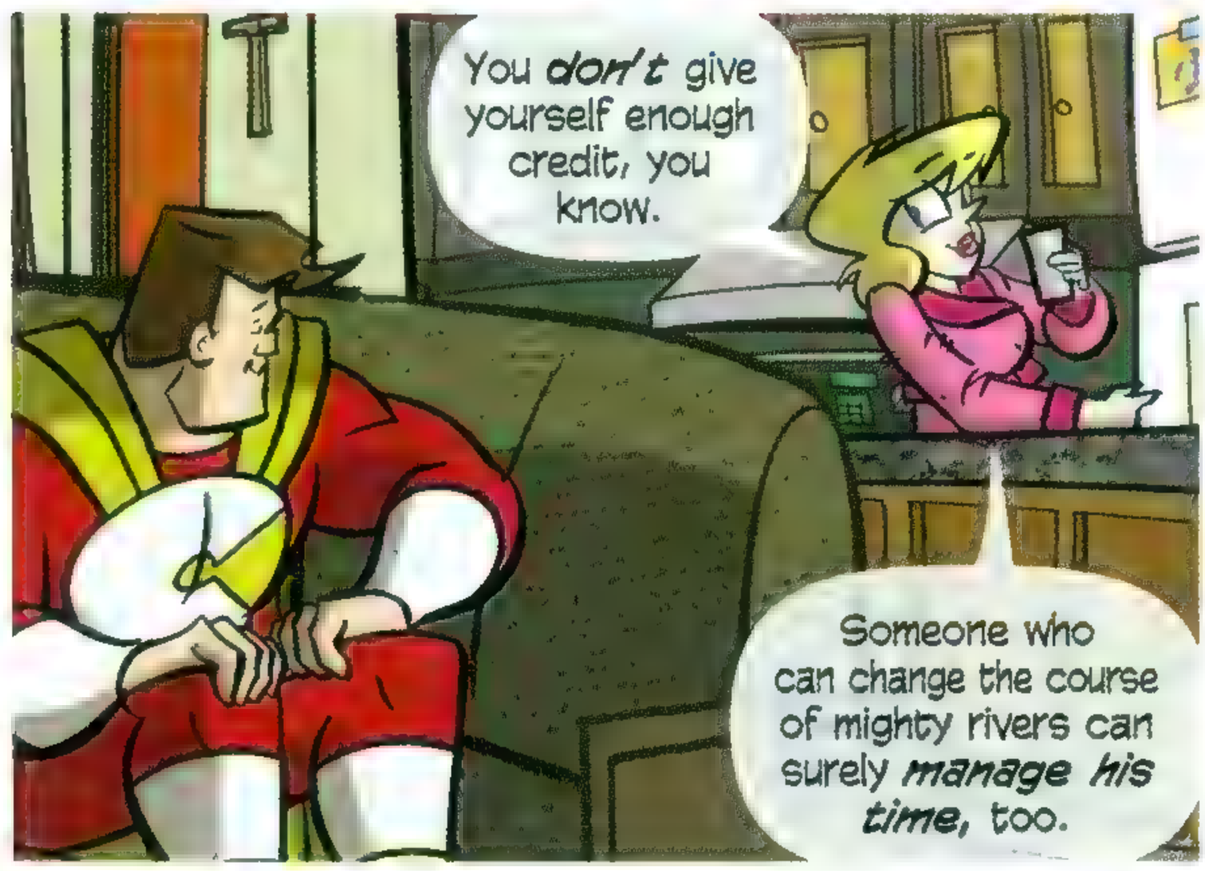
--otherwise I might have *broken my fist* trying to *knock sense* into you.

Oh, Mark. My *sweet*, sweet, *stupid* husband.


You... the Crusader... you're *one person*. The person I decided to *marry*, and the person I *chose* to be the father of my children.
I didn't do that *in spite* of who you are, I did it *because* of it. And I want this baby to know *that person*.

You're *going* to be late for dinner. You're going to miss some *soccer games*.
But you *can't quit* because of that. This child will love you for who you are as much as I do, understand? I'll *make sure* of it.

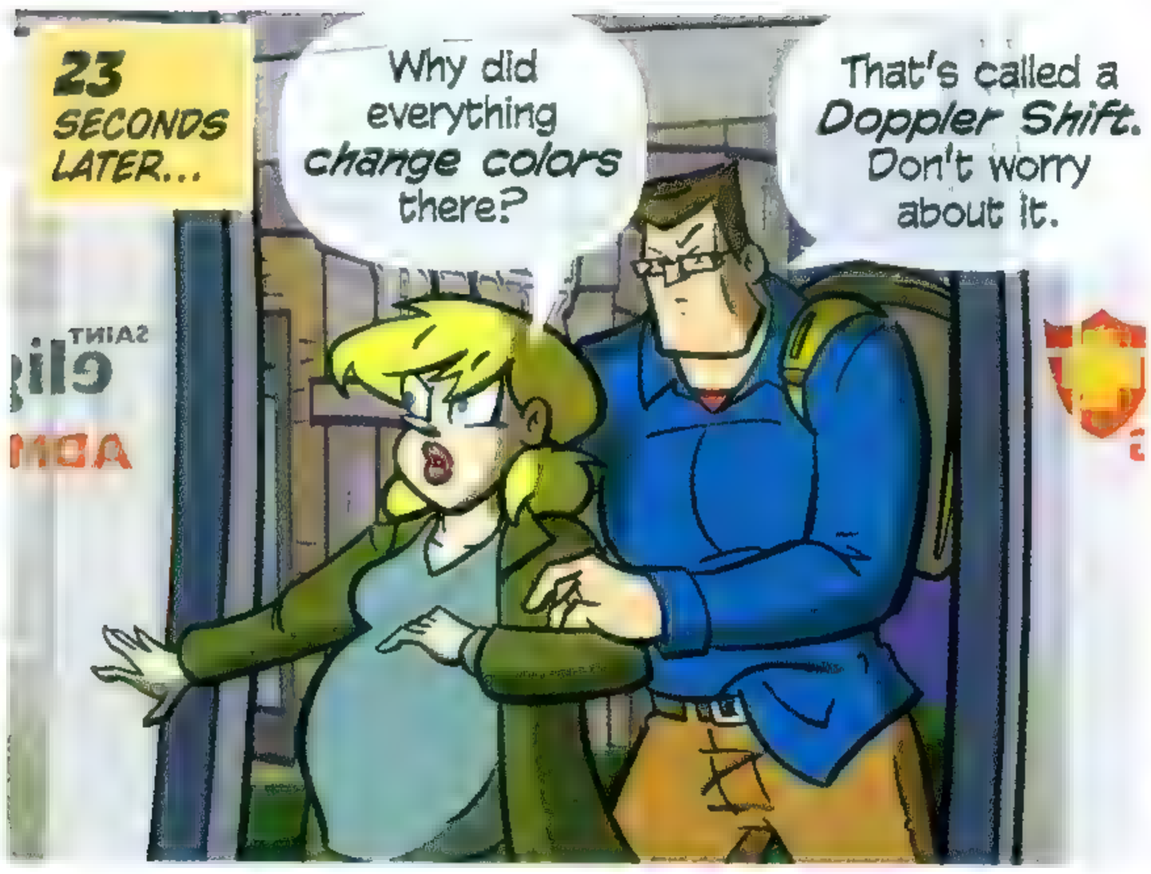
Okay.
But our child is *not* playing soccer.

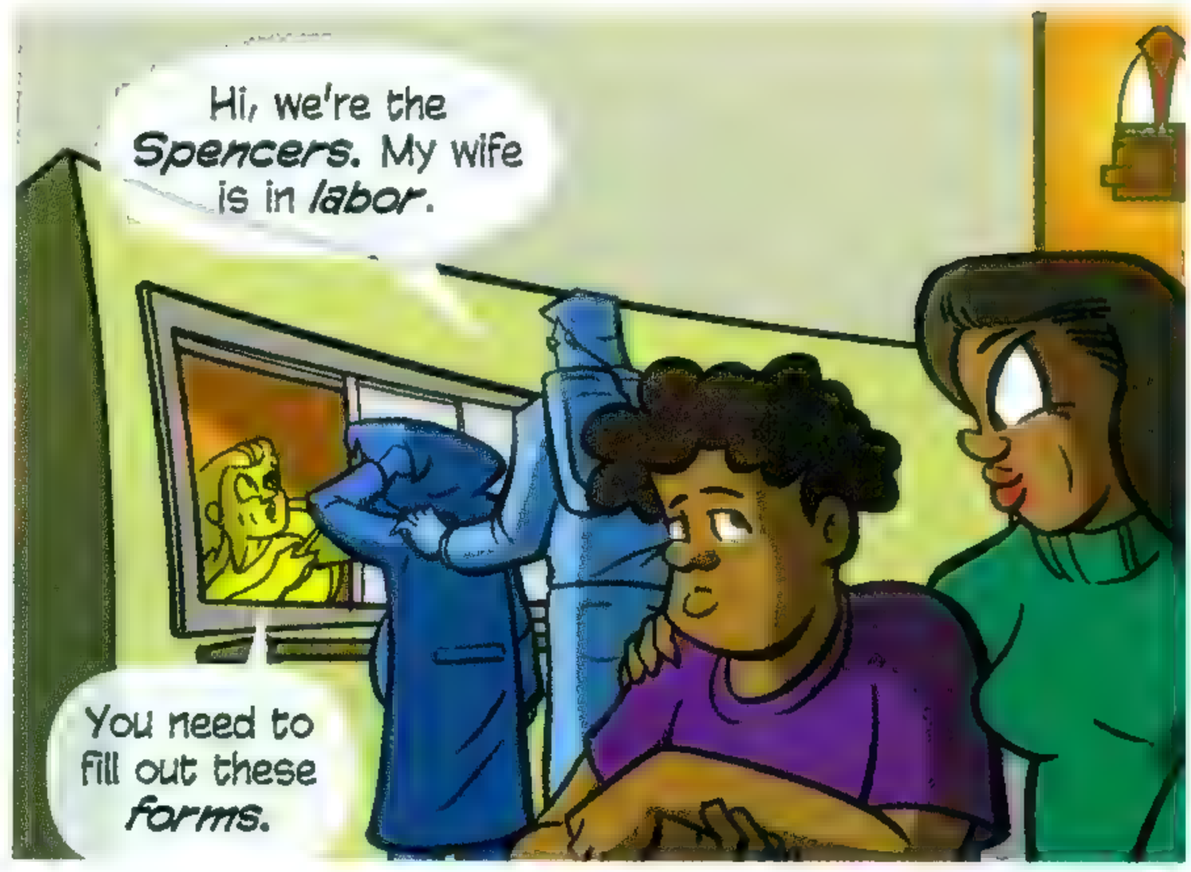

You *don't* give yourself enough credit, you know.
Someone who can change the course of mighty rivers can surely *manage his time*, too.

You know, you're *right*.
When we first got together, I was worried about not having enough time for *you*, and we made *that* work, didn't we?

Yes, *we did*.
And right now, I'm *very glad* I have a superpowered husband.
Oh? *Why* is that?

Because my water just broke.


23 SECONDS LATER...
Why did everything change colors there?
That's called a Doppler Shift. Don't worry about it.


Hi, we're the Spencers. My wife is in labor.
You need to fill out these forms.

As soon as you do that, we can--
Done.

Here are the forms.
Also, you need a new pen.

THEN...
Abby, Mark! How are we doing?
Doctors Karma! I'm surprised to see you using the door.

Oh, I made sure to get Nathelia privileges here at the hospital. We've told them she's my cousin.
It's far easier than casting a glamour on the entire staff and mindwiping anyone we miss.

Now, let's check on Abby.
Hmm. Everything looks good so far, and I see you still want an epidural.
Yes.

I've been vulnerable and I've been invulnerable.
I prefer invulnerable.

All right, let's *see* how far you're dilated.
While she's doing *that*, Mark, may I have a word with you?

What's *wrong*, Doc?
Nothing, my friend. And that is very much the *point*.

You and I, we live in a world of *catastrophe* and *danger*. It is all too natural to ascribe those feelings to a moment like *this*.
Try to remember that what occurs here today is the *most natural* thing in the world, *not* some *crisis* to be survived.

Ugh! Unnh!
CONTRACTION!
Of course, *Abigail* may not appreciate that sentiment.

MEANWHILE...
Jerry! JoAnn! Here she is!
Charlotte! This place is a *maze!*

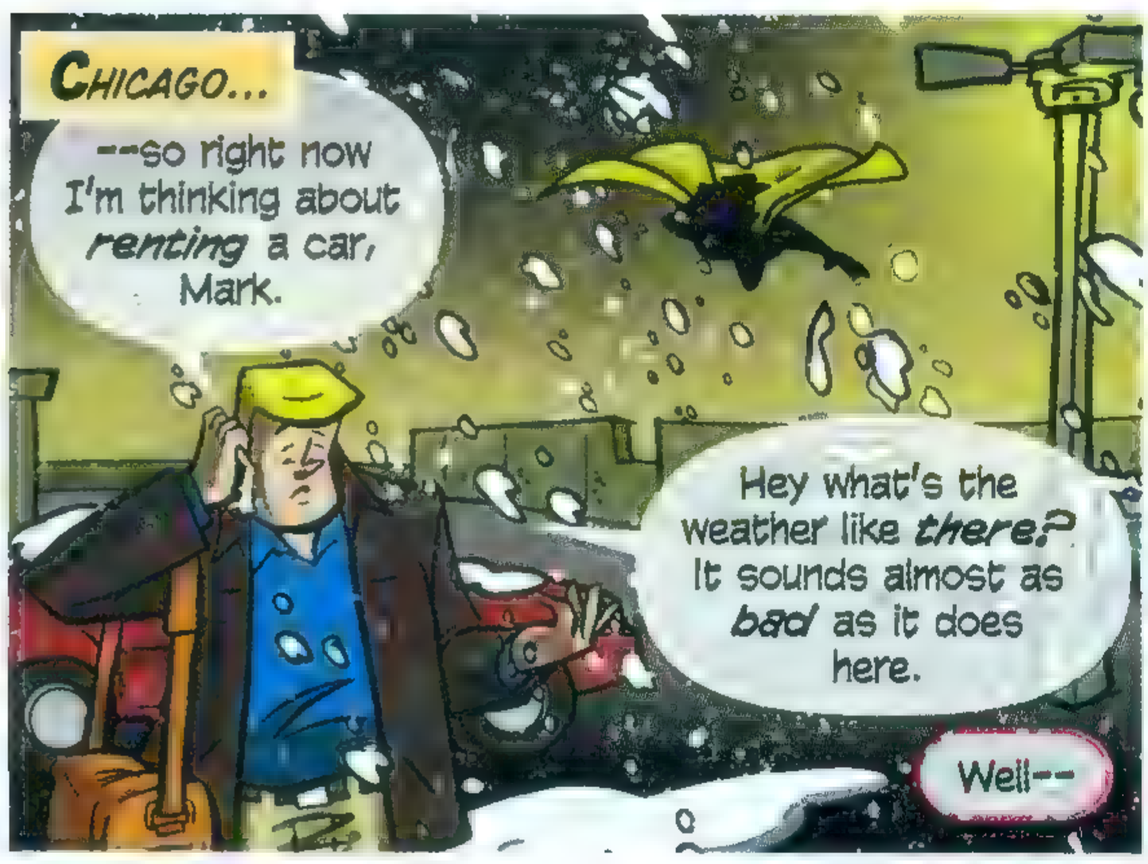
Hello there, Charlotte.
Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Spencer. Looks like you were *smart* to come in a week early.
So, what's the *news*?

Mark was just out a few minutes ago. Everything's going *fine*. Her contractions are five minutes apart. So far there's only been *one* hitch.
What do you think?
What's *that*?

ELSEWHERE...
I'm sorry, sir. *Everything* is snowed in right now.
But it's *April!*
It's also *Chicago*.

THEN...
Honey, Quincy's stuck in Chicago. He's *not* going to make it.
We *both* know that doesn't have to be so.

You *know* what you're asking.
I *do*. But we've talked about doing this before. And I'd like our child's *only uncle* to be here for her *arrival*.


CHICAGO...
--so right now I'm thinking about *renting* a car, Mark.
Hey what's the weather like *there*? It sounds almost as *bad* as it does here.
Well--

--it's about the *same*.
¡Choke!

AND...
I can't believe my brother-in-law is *the Crusader*.
I can't believe I'm about to be a *father*. It's a big day for *everyone*, isn't it?

So who *else* knows?
Well...
Abby's known for *years*. *Charlotte*, too. And I told your parents just *after* the wedding.
Wait, the *only* person you *didn't* tell is *me*?

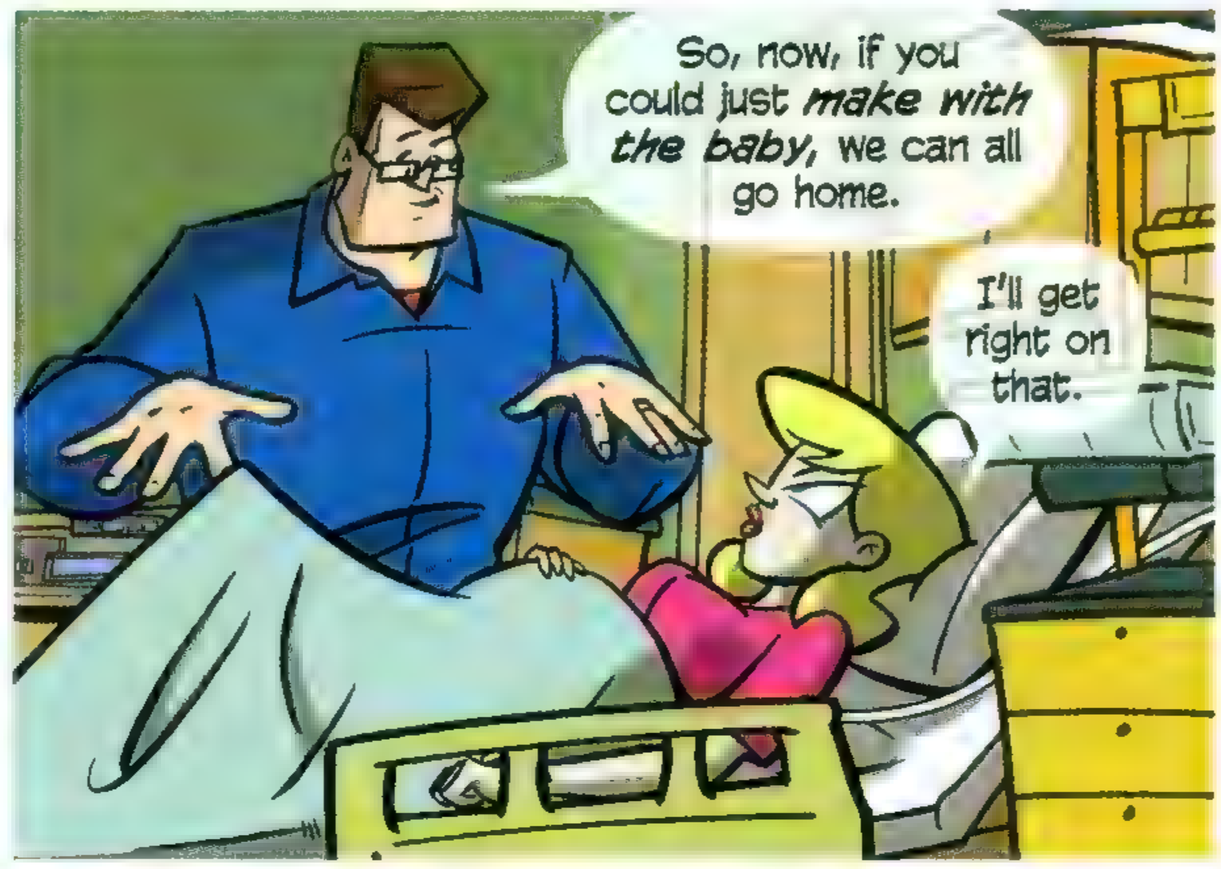
Quincy, you worked at *Channel Six News*, remember? Teling a reporter--even a *sports* reporter--isn't the best way to keep this kind of secret.
Things are a little *different* now that you're employed by the *Deco City Architects*, you know?

Yeah, I get it.
Hey, by the way, my softball team is looking for a new *pitcher*--
Don't make me *drop* you.

LATER...
You were right. He didn't faint.
You owe me ten bucks.
And thank you, Mar--

--kuh--
--kuh--
--come on, little one, I'm on your side here.

Six minutes apart now, right?
Huff! Yup.
Well, everyone's here now and looking forward to meeting this new person.

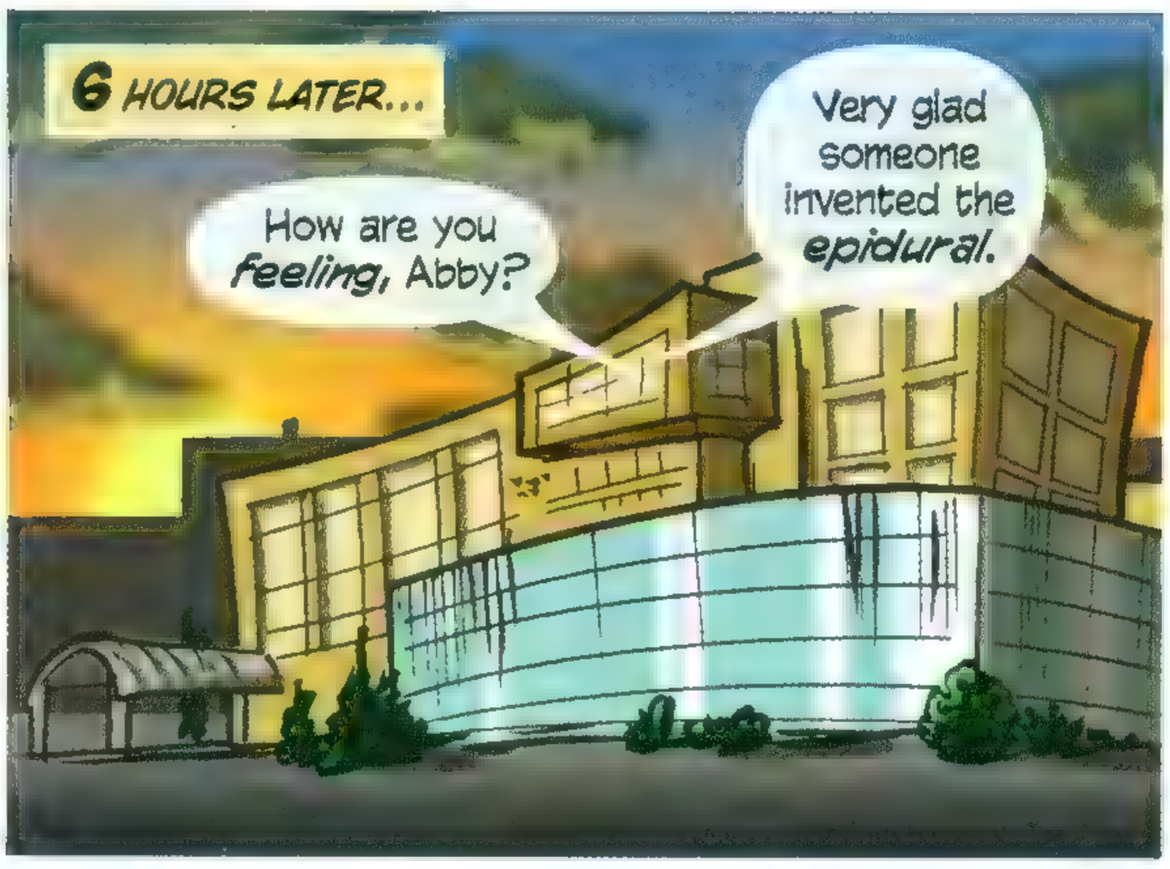

So, now, if you could just make with the baby, we can all go home.
I'll get right on that.

Yow! Again with the Screech Gates?
Um, your phone is ringing, too.

Crusader, it's Major Might. I'm sure you heard that portal open up.
I just wanted to say, don't worry. Only one guy slipped through this time.
Everything's under control, sir. You take care of your wife and baby.
Thank you, Major.

ELSEWHERE...
Everything's under control, eh?
Trust me, Starlet--

--this guy won't know what hit him.
That's what I'm afraid of.


6 HOURS LATER...
How are you *feeling*, Abby?
Very glad someone invented the *epidural*.

I'm sure.
You're also *fully dialated*.

I'm going to call a *nurse*. It looks like this child is *about to arrive*.

Ah, Mark, I nearly forgot. Paul wanted me to give *this* to you with instructions to open it *after* the blessed event.
There's *no* way! Not. Even. *Him*.

FINALLY...
Ow!
All right, Abby. Just one more *big push*.

Push!

There we go!
WAAA-WAAAH!

Abby and Mark, you have a perfectly *healthy*--

"--baby boy!"
Welcome to the world, James.
We're your parents.

THEN...
He's got your nose.
Yeah? I think he's going to have your hair, though.

And he's perfect.
Yes, you are, James. And there are so many people looking forward to meeting you--

"--your grandparents, your uncle, and your aunt."

But I think we're going to keep you to ourselves for just a couple minutes more.

Mark, please! I look horrible.
It's tight on the baby, don't worry.

"But I promised Paul I'd send them a picture."

Don't see why he wanted one, though. He probably already has his length and weight.
He knew it was a boy, didn't he?

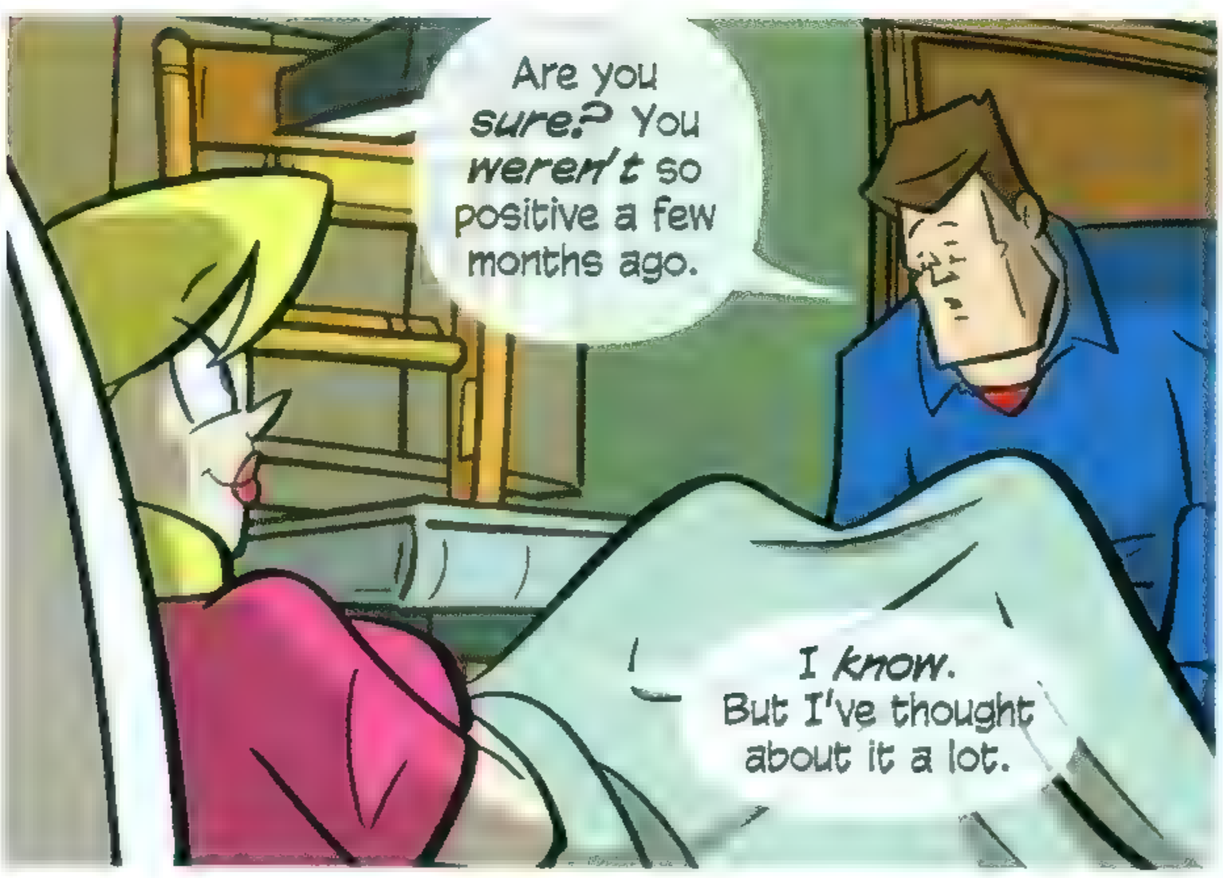
He guessed.
It's Paul, honey, he knew.
÷Grumble!÷ I know.

I don't know if you heard him, but Doc Karma said James *has my powers.*

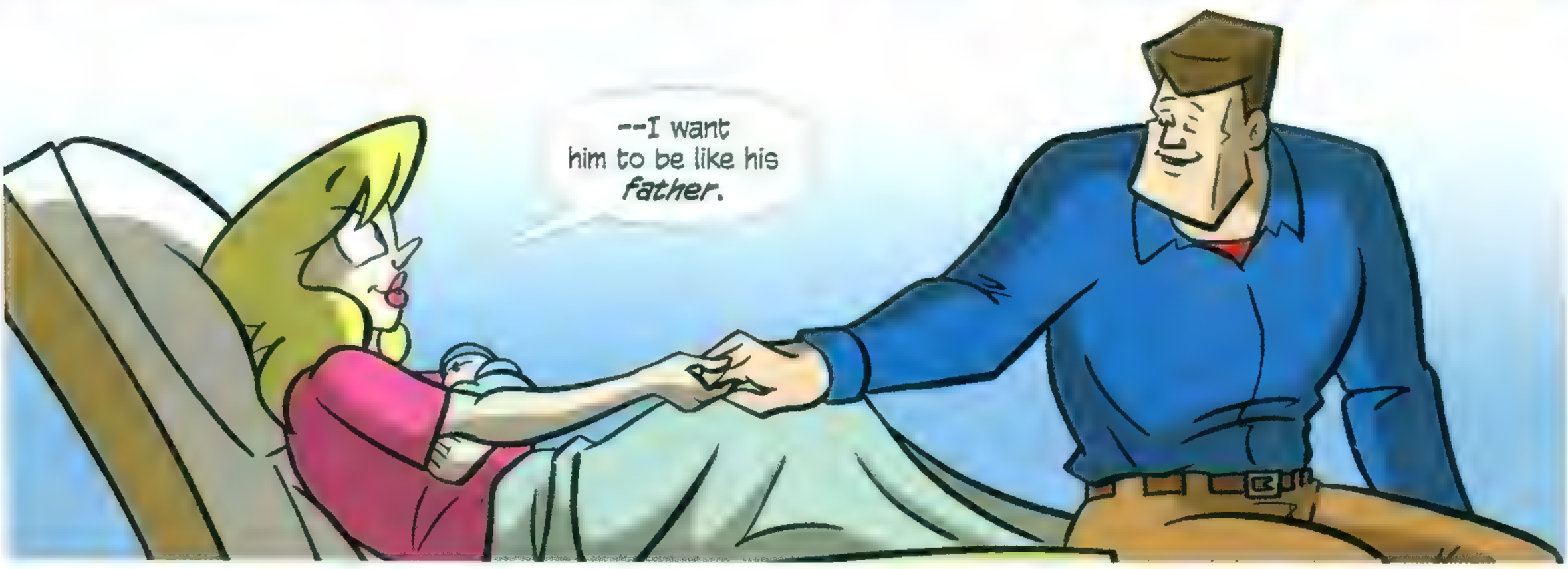
They'll develop like mine did, *slowly,* manifesting in his *teens* and *full strength* by his early twenties.
That is, *if* we release the *restraining spell.*

We didn't talk it *all the way* through because we were *waiting* to see. And we can *still* wait if you'd like--
Mark--

--we have to *release the spell.*


Are you *sure?* You *weren't* so positive a few months ago.
I *know.* But I've thought about it a lot.

I want *so much* for him, Mark. I want him to be *happy.* I want him to be *healthy.*
But *most* of all--


--I want him to be like his *father.*

ELSEWHERE...
So, how did it go? Did you get it?

One pulverized giant Chlorovore tooth.
Just what we need to counteract Lord Blackseed's planetary poison.

In the future.
Yup. Sorry I can't tell you more, but we need to preserve causality.
But none of it would have been possible if you hadn't let me pretend to be your super-self.

What's that look for?
It's just weird seeing yourself without using a mirror.
Isn't it?

Did anyone figure out you weren't me?
I don't think so, but you never can tell with Darkblade, can you?

Other than that, this image transducer fooled everyone perfectly.
Thanks again. I had a really special trip.

Well, I'd better be getting back. Saving the world and all that. You know how it is.
I do.

Goodbye!
And--

--HAPPY BIRTHDAY!
Thanks!
I'll see you... later!
END

VALENTINE'S DAY
SPECIAL

LOVE AND CAPES
Mark, there's something I've been meaning to *ask* you.
So, *Valentine's Day* is coming up, and, um, I'm a little *stuck* on what to get *Amazonia*.
HAH HA HA!
Really? *You*? Asking *me*?

After *all the times* you busted on me for asking you the *same thing* about Abby?
Yes, I recognize the *irony*.

But, you're *better* at the relationship thing than I am. And you *did* date Zoe for a bit.
Wait! *Better than you*? The self-proclaimed greatest deductive mind of our generation?
You'll have to excuse me. I need to *bask* in this *moment*.

So--
Nope. *Still basking*.

Look, it's our *first* Valentine's Day together and I want to *make sure* that I do it right.
But she is *impossible* to shop for.

Heck, we're both so *rich* that we usually just buy anything we want
Yes, the burdens of the *one percent.*

When you two were dating, what did *you* get her?
I didn't get her anything. We had a moonlight dinner on top of *Mount Everest.*

But you need *oxygen* over 8,200 feet.
No, *you* need oxygen over 8,200 feet.

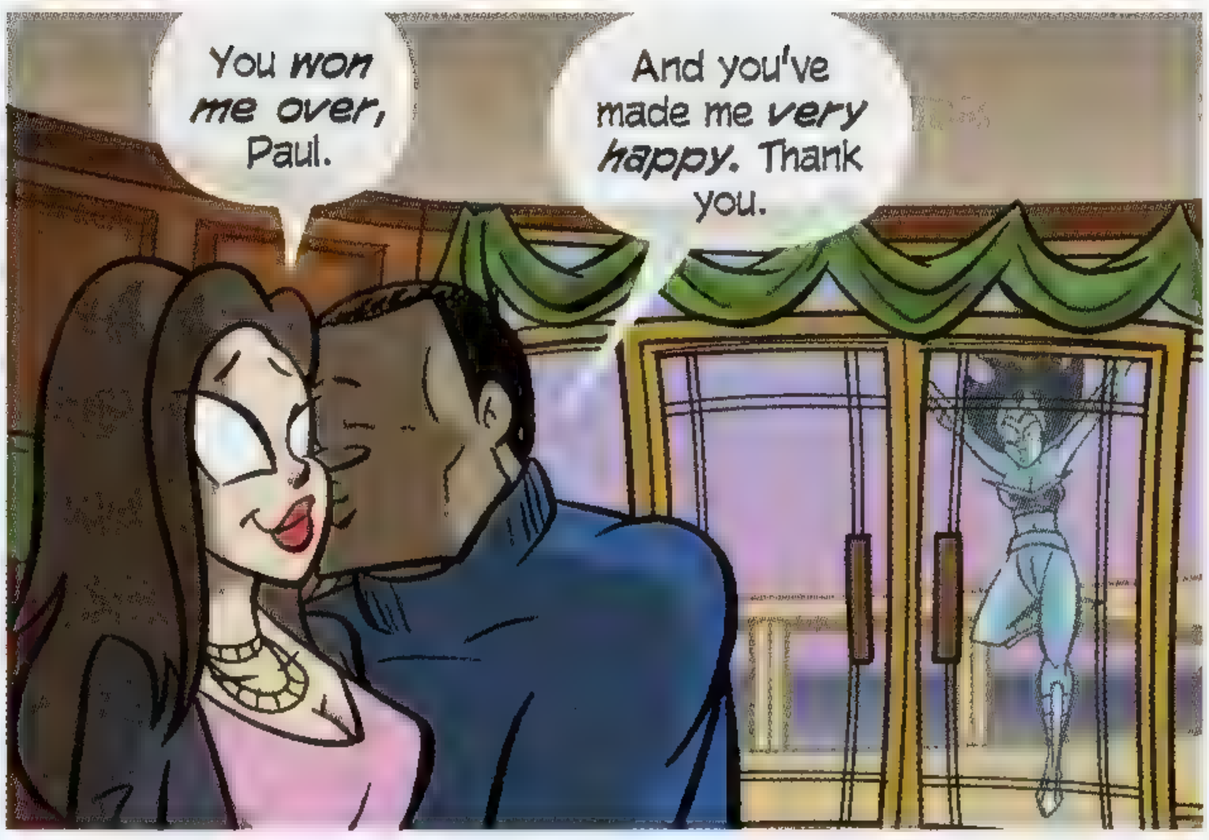
Paul, a day like Valentine's Day isn't about *stuff,* it's about celebrating your relationship. You can do that with presents, sure, but you can also do it with *attention.*

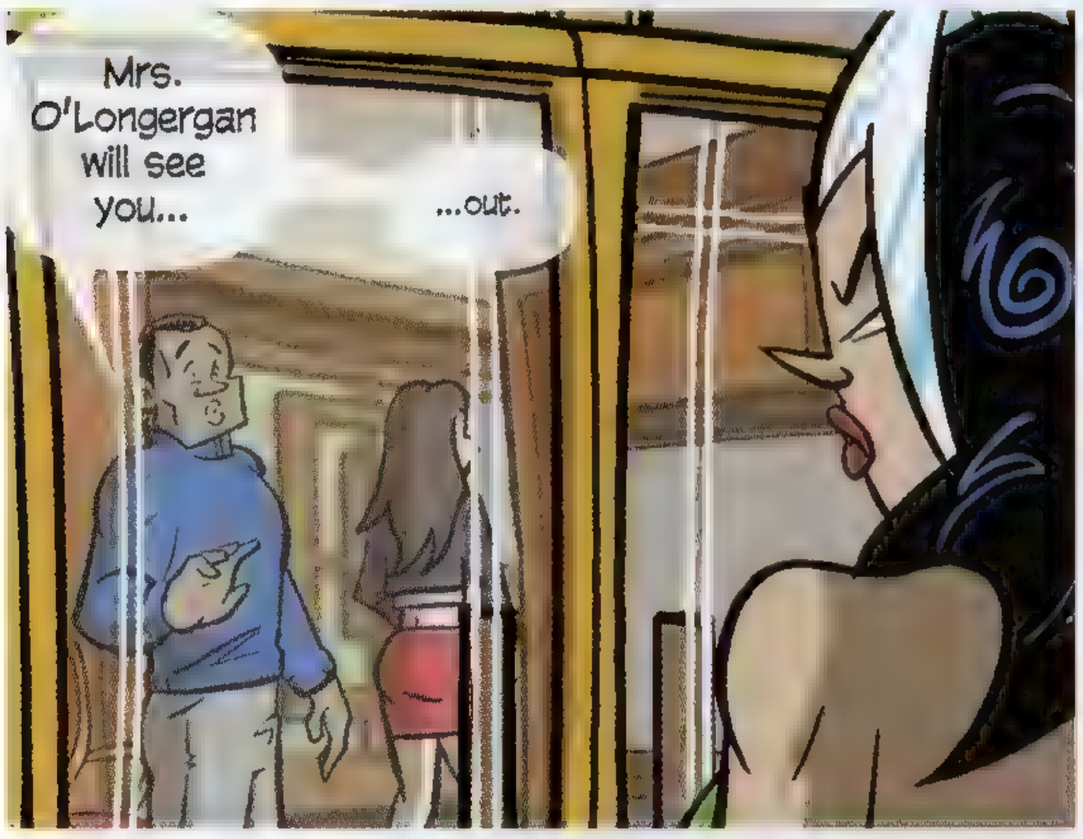
What you want to do is make her feel like *a star* that day.

A *star*--! Mark, you're a *genius!*
Gotta go! *Thanks!*
Um, sure.

Huh. I feel just like *Wilson* on "*House.*"

THE NEXT DAY...
--I think this will be a *great move* for you, Janelle.


You *won me over,* Paul.
And you've made me *very happy.* Thank you.

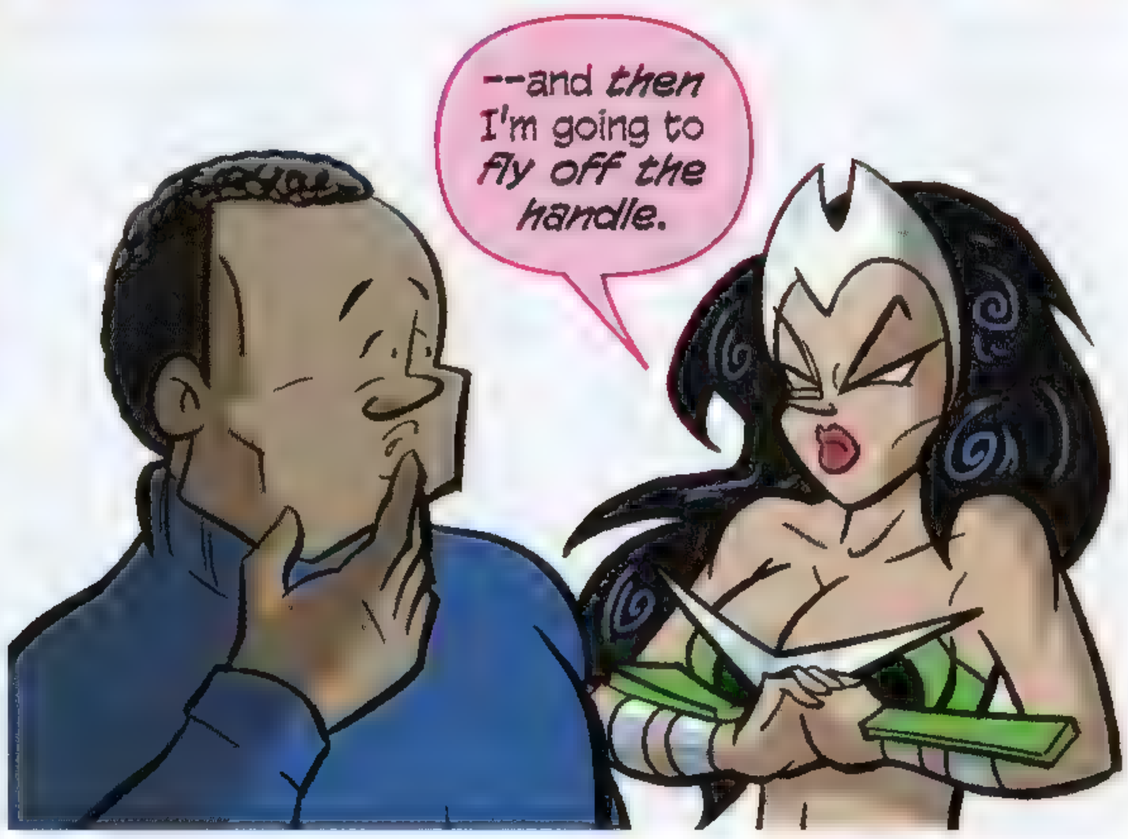

Mrs. O'Longergan will see you...
...out.

You're *early.*
So I gathered.

Now *Zoe,* before you *fly off the handle--*
I'm *not* going to do that Paul.

I *know* I've got a jealous streak, and Im *trying* to work on that.
Really?
Absolutely.

So, I'm going to let you explain why you *didn't tell me* you were meeting with *Janelle Erickson--*
--an actress who's broken up at least *two* of her co-stars' *marriages--*
--and why you were *kissing her goodbye--*


--and *then* I'm going to *fly off the handle.*

Zoe, do you remember a couple years ago when there was interest in making a *movie* about you?
Vividly.

Years ago...
Amazonia, we *love* your story. We think it'll make a *great* film.
Of course, we'll need to make a *couple* of *tweaks* to it.
Obviously, the *costume* is a little silly.
We've had our art department work up a couple of *fresh looks.*

And rather than coming to earth from another *dimension,* we're thinking that you've been raised *here* and only *later* discover your true identity.
It might work better if your *father* was *human,* too.
We're talking to *Daisie Sparks,* you know, from the *Tween Music Team* show--

And, on behalf of my fellow studio executives everywhere, thank you for *not* throwing them out the window.
I confess I *did* consider it. *A lot.*

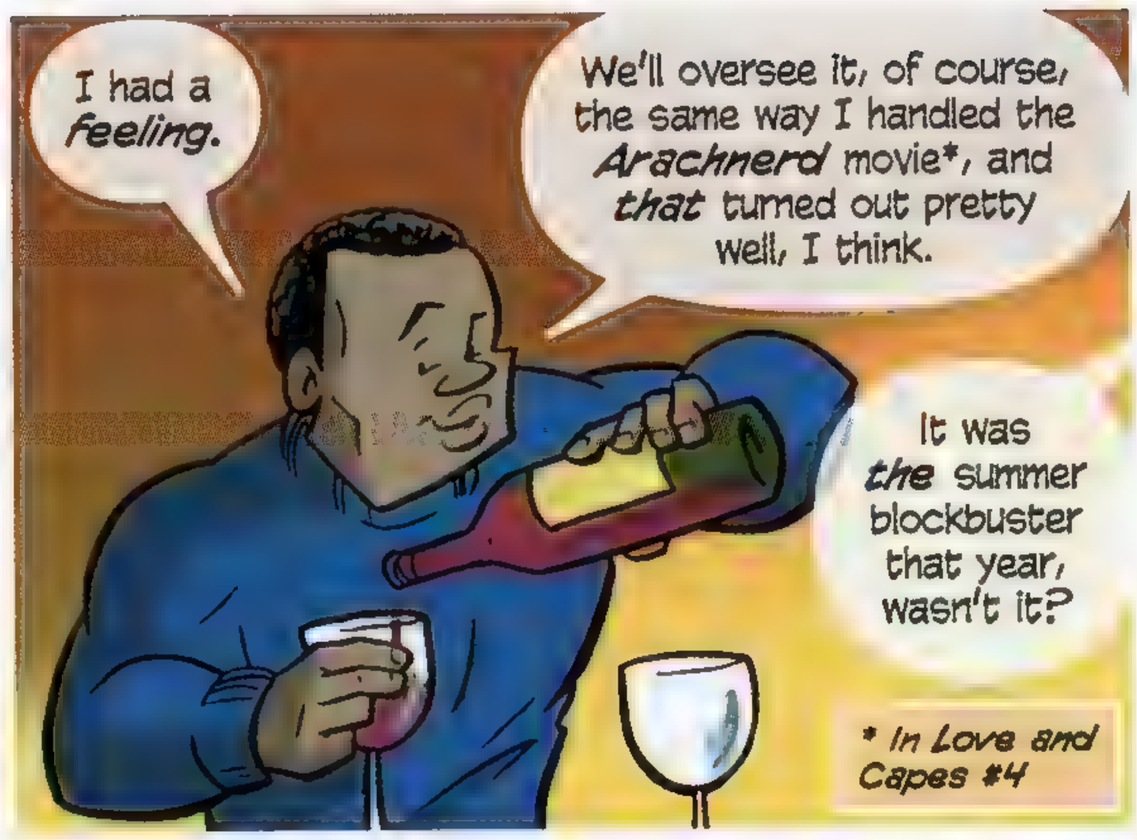
During that time, do you remember who *you* thought should play you in the movie?
Sure. It was--

--*Janelle Erickson.*
And guess who just signed to play the lead in *Lacroix Studios' new Amazonia film?*

Oh, Paul! Thank you *so much!*
I'm sorry I ruined the *surprise.*

Although, now that I've seen her, she *might* be a little *short* for the role.
Don't worry about that, Hollywood has a *long tradition* of shooting *short* people *tall.*

The deal is, of course, contingent on you *signing off* on it.
I think we can work *something* out.


I had a *feeling.*
We'll oversee it, of course, the same way I handled the *Arachnerd* movie*, and *that* turned out pretty well, I think.
It was *the* summer blockbuster that year, wasn't it?
* *In Love and Capes #4*

Yes, it was.
Here's to the *next* summer blockbuster.
Here here.

So... *Whedon?*
Friedman.
Ooh! I loved *Sarah Connor Chronicles.*

LATER...
Wait, he got you a *movie?*
A movie with *creative control* and a *producer credit.*

I hope you got him *something good.*
I think so.

What *did* you get him?
A *cookie bouquet.*

What?
He *really* likes cookies.

How lucky *we* are to *have them?*

I was going to say how lucky *they* are to have *us*--

--but it *goes both ways.*

"There's someone out there for everyone, even if you need a pickaxe, a compass, and night goggles to find them."

Harris K. Telemacher in "L.A. Story"

Happy Valentine's Day!

BEHIND THE SCENES

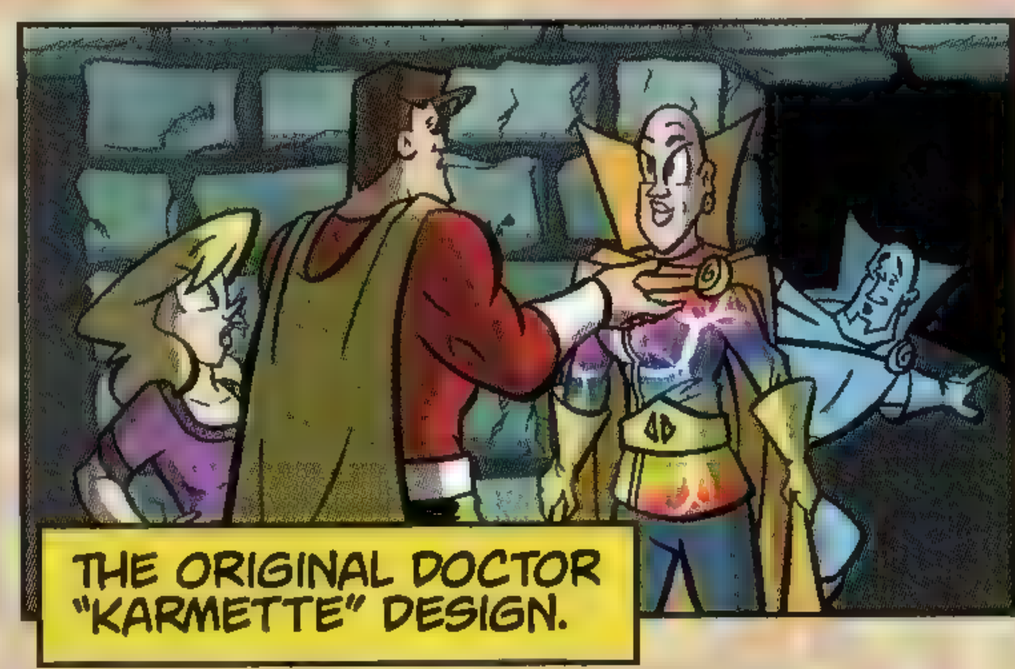
IT'S JUST LIKE SCIENCE FICTION, RIGHT?

I've been in relationships. I've watched people get married. I've spent time with them as they've moved in together. But pregnancy, that's pretty far outside my realm of experience.

Fortunately, my friends Mike and Colleen Bokausek were more than happy to share with me the adventures of their pregnancies. Mike was a frequent sounding board. And Colleen spoke to me at length, and lent me some books. So, yes, I read *The Girlfriend's Guide to Getting Pregnant* and *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, all to prepare for this series. The things I do for you.

Part of this issue was influenced by Louise Simonson's *Adventures of Superman* annual which takes place in an alternate future where Lois is pregnant with Superman's baby until the baby kicks… and she dies.

Once you read that you cannot get that out of your brain.



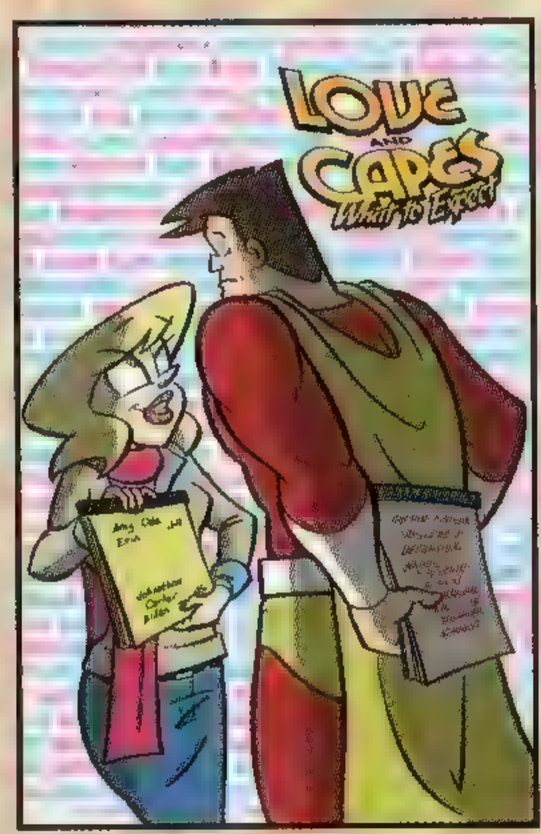
THE ORIGINAL DOCTOR "KARMETTE" DESIGN.

I had to deal with the baby's powers or lack thereof. I've kept Mark's origin a secret–and you won't be reading it here either, buddy–but it's been revealed his powers developed in his teens. But since Mark has powers now, would the baby inherit them?

Doc Karma to the rescue and his spell to keep the baby's potential powers in check. That took care of one issue.

I've also heard that many women prefer a female doctor especially during pregnancy. I can understand that. I was very happy with the alternate universe "Doctor Karmette." Originally, she looked a little different: she was bald like our universe's doctor. To me, she kind of looked like Marvel's Moondragon, but reaction by my Secret Society of Super Reviewers was so negative to the look that I went in and altered the art and gave her hair. It's a much better choice.

This issue featured characters telling me what they were going to do, rather than what I wanted. Mark and his father's conversation on the porch was supposed to end with the two of them, and his father saying "Yeah, you can't tell her everything, but you can always talk to me." When I started to write that scene, the elder Spencer told Mark (and me) "You know you're being an idiot, right?" And then the true scene was written.



This issue also had a special San Diego exclusive cover. I left space on Abby's pad to add a name or names chosen by people who bought it. So, people could put their kids' names on the cover. This was my best selling issue at conventions… until I sold out a couple months later.

I HAD EVERYTHING BUT THE COVER...

MARK AND ABBY BABYSITTING WAS AN IDEA I'D HAD FOR A WHILE.

Waiting until they were actually pregnant made the idea perfect. I had to introduce a cousin for Abby, who you'll notice is named Olivia, after the famous Cousin Oliver from *The Brady Bunch*. She's the never-seen mother of Carter and Aidan from issue #4 of the original series.

I was, however, stuck on a cover. Until my girlfriend said "What about doing a parody of *Adventures in Babysitting*? I had even described the issue that way to her, and I missed it. She was right. It was perfect.

This was also the first guest-inked cover featuring the brushy stylings of my good friend Sean Tiffany. We'd worked together a lot at Kubert, and I asked if he'd help out on this cover. He said "yes," on one condition: he had to color the cover, too.

The colors are as he intended them with three small changes. The kids with Abby are based on my goddaughter Erin, and cousin's kids Carter and Aidan. I neglected to tell Sean the hair colors needed, so I had to change those to match. Uncle Thom gets all sorts of credit and love for putting the kids in the books, so that couldn't be changed.

Erin's brother wouldn't fit on this cover, so he appears on the next.

The bit about Abby not being able to keep down the prenatal vitamins was courtesy of the Bokausek clan. Mike gave me that fact, along with the Amazonia chewable vitamin payoff. Sometimes, you get gifts.

This issue started laying the groundwork for Charlotte buying into the bookstore in #6. I love that Charlotte gets to kick some butt in her two-page scene at the art museum showing her being awesome, and still being very Charlotte.

There are several little call-outs to friends and geekdom in this issue. One of the books on the display shelf is *Women are from Tatooine, Men are from Hoth*. Amongst the toys in Tina's bedroom are clearly Lots-o-Huggin' Bear from *Toy Story 3* and Bloop from Steve Conley's strip. In the museum scene, you can see Neal Caffrey and Peter Burke from *White Collar*. The John Q. Gallagher museum wing is named after the creator of *Buzzboy* (though the "Q" is a joke, not his actual middle initial).

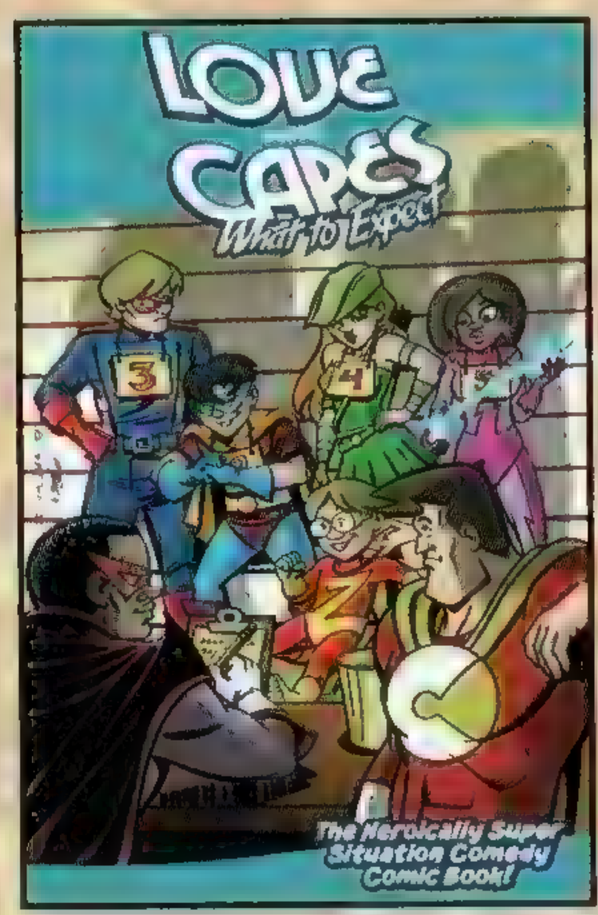
This issue, Amazonia and Darkblade move in together. How sweet! My plotting style of "What's the worst time for something to happen" certainly won't come into play there.

DIVINELY INSPIRED

SINCE THE IDEA FOR THIS CAME TO ME IN CHURCH, I THINK I CAN CALL IT THAT.

Sue me. The homily was kind of boring that day, and as my mind wandered, the idea came to me "What if Amazonia became Queen?"

Of course that didn't make sense. She's the youngest of ten… unless their line of succession was through the youngest. But she could just turn it down… unless doing so meant banishment. Hey, there's a story in there!



The fact that I was in a long-distance relationship didn't play into this idea at all.

It was kind of perfect. A three-issue arc where Amazonia and Darkblade were separated. That would be a cool story to tell.

I was very lucky to get Jerry Ordway to ink this cover. Jerry is one of my favorite comic book artists and I was fortunate enough to become friends with him years ago. The cover is an *American Idol* setup with several sidekick parodies. The speedster kid is modeled after my goddaughter's brother, Johnathan. Things have to be fair, you know.

The sidekick idea came about as I was writing it. We know that Darkblade is a legacy character, but we never discussed any of the previous ones, or how a new one was chosen. I got to introduce sidekicks, but still make it so that Paul was never a sidekick to anyone else. I love the monastery and the character bits with Brother Caden.

The Mark and Abby plot of women telling Abby pregnancy horror stories is something I've noticed my pregnant friends going through. I don't understand why that happens. They must be trying to help. And it let me do a very cool Abby and Mrs. Spencer bonding moment.

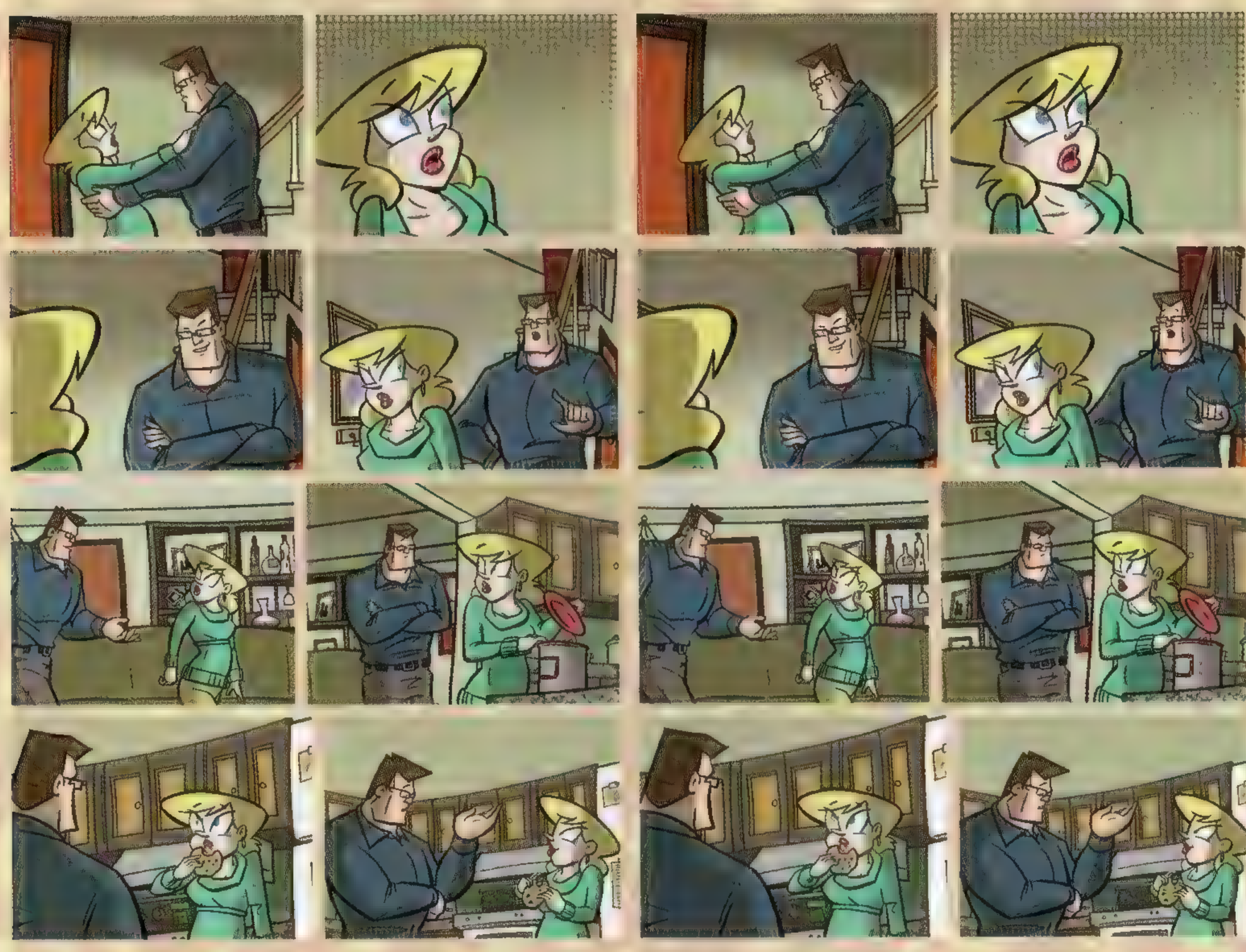
The bit where Paul starts trying to figure out the sex of the baby, that was just a joke. Then I thought that it might be cool if he did. Then I figured out **how** he could. But more on that later.

This issue almost went off the rails, too. Traditionally, I write, draw, ink, color, letter and script a page at a time. But my travel schedule picked up this year, and while I could draw on the road, coloring on a tiny laptop screen was a little more trying. So I drew without coloring. Stupidly, I didn't take good notes. So I ran into more than a few scenes where two characters seemed to be talking about something interesting, but I couldn't remember what.

Worse yet, I had two pages of Mark and Abby talking near the end of the book, but the big meaningful Abby and Mrs. Spencer scene was just one page. I'm sure it seemed like a good idea at the time, but in execution it wasn't. So, with the deadline almost upon me, I drew a new page and moved some other scenes around.

So, I present here the original two pages of Mark and Abby. Panels were cut and changed to make this one page, and it worked so much better. I can't imagine I ever saw this scene any other way.

As to what they were saying here, your guess is as good as mine.



SETTING UP THE CHESSBOARD

I'M STILL WORRIED THIS IS THE ISSUE WHERE NOTHING HAPPENS.

There were a lot of pieces that needed to be moved into place for the end of this arc. I had to explain all the machinations of the "Queen Amazonia" arc. Abby had to get more pregnant, the bookstore had to fall on hard times… so much stuff. But all setup, and little payoff.

I handled the explanation for Amazonia's plight as a flashback to last issue. True to form, I forgot that Paul had a crew neck shirt and originally drew him with a collar. You'd think I could keep my own character costumes straight, but no.

I'd been planning to wreck the bookstore for a while. Originally, when I had the newlywed and baby arc as the same six issue sequence (yeah, what the heck was I thinking?) the end game for Charlotte was to be part of the solution. One of my concerns in the previous "Wake Up Where You Are" arc was that Charlotte didn't have a lot to do because I was waiting for this. Here's where I introduced the bookstore going through its rough patch.

Obviously, a bookstore having trouble in this economy was ripped from the headlines with the closing of the Borders chain. It was just natural to deal with it. And I wanted Abby to be the one to figure it out, not have another character solve it for her, or even do that *House* moment of "Hey, that thing you said has inspired my solution!"

I wanted to pile on the problems for the bookstore, too. My original thought was to have the bookstore broken into, but that was a little extreme. Egging the store and its neighbors seemed like just the right amount of difficult to make Abby's life a little rougher.

This issue's cover was inked by Mike Manley. Mike is insanely talented and can draw darn near anything and in any style. Among other things, he's the current artist on the *Judge Parker* comic strip. I loved getting him to ink this cover, which might be the funniest of this run.

LIKE THOSE HOUSE SWAPPING SHOWS... BUT WITH BODIES

THIS ISSUE COULD HAVE EASILY BEEN TWICE AS LONG.

Mark and Abby switching bodies in the eighth month of her pregnancy. It was a comedic gold mine. Once I hit this idea, I knew I had something special.

Better yet, Abby's had super powers before (back in issue #10 of the original series) so I could avoid a lot of the "Abby dealing with being a superhero" moments and go straight into the more germaine pregnancy stuff.

Writing Mark pregant and freaking out because he's not prepared for pain is one of my favorite scenes in terms of writing and drawing. I love the body language there. I also think Abby's idea that only one of them can freak out at a time is a great relationship moment.

Making the body switch the result of tiki magic seemed perfect too. I even grabbed some of that imagery for the pattern on the cover, expertly inked by Chris Bailey. Chris is an awesome artist, winner of the Russ Manning Most Talented Newcomer Award, as well as the animation talent behind *Mickey Mouse: Runaway Brain*, the "Nightcrawler in the White House" scene from *X-Men 2*, and the *Alvin and the Chipmunks* movies. He's the one who pointed me to the awesome *Drawn to Life* books which I can't recommend enough. And he's a friend to boot.

More is made of the baby shower in this issue, which was a plotline that I eventually cut short. After Abby explained how she didn't like baby showers last issue, I liked the idea of Mark having to suffer through it instead. But, there was no room for it. Doing so meant introducing more characters, having Abby's mom deal with the body switch and so much more.

Also cut was a scene where Mark in Abby's body had to go to a pregnancy checkup. It was a funny scene, but it didn't ring true and again, there was nowhere to put it.

The other big story point was Amazonia resolving her Queen situation. I was trying to make things as difficult as possible for her, even writing a breakup

scene for Darkblade and Amazonia. I'm proud of that, because they're both very much in character. No one yells. No one gets hysterical. It's just a quietly painful scene.

I first read a great description of drama in David Gerrold's *World of Star Trek* book, where he described some stories as puzzle-box stories, where the character has to figure a way out of a problem, and a drama, where a character has to make a choice and either way things change for that character. So it was very important for me to have Amazonia choose Paul and Earth (and not *just* Paul, but her life on Earth as well) believing at the time that doing so means leaving Leandia forever.

Of course, Abby has inspired Oriana to think in new ways, and as such changes things for the better. Or at least introduces the possibility.

This story took on a life of its own and ran two pages over my normal 24. Deadlines were tight, and I would have rather not done that, but you tell the story that needs to be told.

And man, is it weird drawing Zoe without her tiara.

THE BIG PAYOFF

THESE ARE THE ISSUES WHERE YOU HAVE TO STICK THE LANDING.

Okay, let's get this out of the way. Paul straight-up figures out that the baby will be a boy. Look at the scene with Major Might, Crusader and Darkblade. Crusader clamps his hands to his ears when he hears the Screech Gate open. In the background, Major Might is clearly affected by the sound, even though he doesn't have super hearing. Darkblade notices this, which accounts for his distraction in the next panel.

So, Darkblade probably does a bit of an investigation off-panel, figures out that Major Might isn't actually Major Might, but is in fact the Crusader's child from the future. So he figures out it's a boy.

Also, James Spencer's superhero name is never said, but there's a big T on his chest, and if you are an obsessive fan of *Love and Capes*, you'll notice that the colors of his costume are the same as Abby's when she had powers a few years back. Her superhero name was Titania, so his is Titan, taken to honor his mother's brief career.

This issue closes a lot of the hanging threads.

Dagger is chosen as Darkblade's permanent sidekick. More important than that to me is the brief moment where Amazonia and Mrs. O'Lonergan have a connection. Charlotte buys into the bookstore, and in fact becomes the salvation of it. (By the way I would love to be in a 24-Hour Comic Day documentary. Contact me if you're interested in making one!)

Quincy finds out Mark's dual identity, too. This was planned for a while, and I'd originally considered telling him when Abby's parents found out, but that seemed too much. I also have been holding on to the underpinning of Mark not trusting Quincy because he's a reporter as much as anything else. It's probably unfair to tell someone who's a reporter the greatest secret ever but expect them not to reveal it. Now that he's calling the baseball games, and is paid by the ball club itself, he no longer has the onus of being an good reporter.

Things were cut. Any baby shower plans were excised from the script. I'd had the idea that Paul and Zoe would give the parents-to-be a stroller that pulls a Transformers-type move and becomes a floating baby pod so that Mark could walk the baby in mid-air. I do like that while Paul provides for the baby's education, he makes Mark work for it, rather than just give it away.

To put it on the table, I loved Joss Whedon's *Avengers* film. But those heroes do a **lot** of killing for a group of superheroes, don't they? I had to make a swipe at that, especially if it let me further set up the Quincy/Mark tension.

James gets to spend some time with his parents in their prime. It's worth noting that every sixth issue of *Love and Capes* is the end of the arc, and each has been replete with flashbacks. (Zoe's book in #6, Abby going back to her first date in #12, the Windstar flashbacks in "Ever After" #5) This continues that structure, because from James' point of view, everything is a flashback.

I also did a flash-forward with Mark telling the family and sending Darkblade and Amazonia the text. That stuff needed to be acknowledged, but the emotional end of the arc had to be Abby saying "I want him to be like his father."

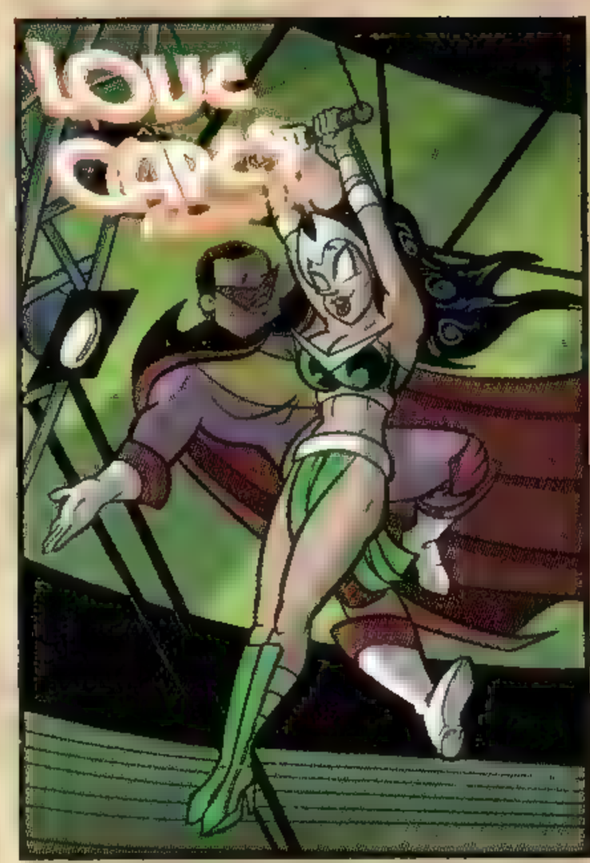
I certainly didn't get misty-eyed when writing that ever.

This issue has guest inks by Rich Faber, DC inker and good friend, and member of the Comic Book Diner, which is often kind enough to let me set up with them or drop by their podcast. The cover idea came to me when I was wondering what I could do that wouldn't give too much away. Charlotte's never been featured on a cover (she does appear with everyone else on the wedding cover, but not prominently) so I thought it was about time. I did cheat and let Amazonia keep her tiara so as not to spoil anything for advance orderers. The cover also features pink and blue, just to further conceal what the sex of the baby might be.

I AM NOTHING IF NOT A PUBLICITY MACHINE

THE LAST STORY IN THIS COLLECTION IS A SIX-PAGE VALENTINE'S DAY SPECIAL

Technically, it's out of continuity. If you need a place to wedge it in, between "Ever After" #3 and #4 is probably a good fit.



This story was made available on TheMarySue.com as a three-day event. Valentine's Day is the one day of the year I get almost automatic media attention, and with not having a new issue out for that day, I wanted to do something special. It also allowed me to drive people to their Diamond Previews catalog where issue #1 was available for preorder.

The story has only been printed once, as a stretch reward for my Kickstarter art book, *Rhinos Bowling and Other Silly Things I've Been Paid to Draw.*

The cover was done for my friends Scott and Grace. They commissioned an homage to the famous *Birds of Prey* Nightwing/Oracle cover and were kind enough to let me use it here.

LOVE AND CAPES

WRITTEN AND DRAWN BY THOMAS F. ZAHLER

A magical creature from deep in the forests of Timberlake, Thom Zahler is one of those mythical creatures that can do it all. Draw, color, letter, play third base and bat left-handed.

He began his training at the magical Kubert School, where he honed his talent for drawing and lettered other students' projects for free pizza.

Upon graduation, he emerged from the school ready to do battle with the forces of those who need artwork. Or forces that want people not to have artwork. Something like that.

Either way, he's worked for the Cleveland Indians, Prilosec, the Dallas Fort Worth Weekly, Image, Lone Star Press, and IDW, including writing and drawing the Twillight Sparkle issue of their *My Little Pony* micro-series. He has also lost two separate Harvey Awards for Humor.

To this day, Zahler continues to fight the Art Wars on both the west and north coasts. (Ohio borders Canada on a body of water! It's a coast!)

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

AMY WOLFRAM, BILL WILLIAMS, DEITRI VILLARREAL, PAUL D. STORRIE, SANDI SCHEIDERER, JILL A. SMITH, AMY RATCLIFFE, ROGER PRICE, MARC NATHAN, JESSE JACKSON, MIKE HORKAN, CARIDAD FERRER, HARLAN & SUSAN ELLISON, AND MIKE BOKAUSEK

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Mark and Abby are getting ready to welcome an addition to their family, and they couldn't be more excited.

But there's so much to do. Their parents have to be told, the nursery needs to be painted, and... what if the baby has super powers like his father?

Add to that a crisis in Amazonia's dimension and very real-world concerns for Abby's bookstore, and it's going to be a very interesting nine months for comicdom's favorite couple.

"'What to Expect' really ups the ante. There's more of everything I love about it: more super-heroes dealing with real world emotional and relationship issues (in and among the tropes – often very self-aware tropes – of their genre), more humor, more drama, more soap opera and an expanding cast given more depth."

GREG WEISMAN (from his introduction)
YOUNG JUSTICE, GARGOYLES

"Thom Zahler gets many things right with *Love and Capes*: laugh-out-loud comedy, spot-on superhero parody and fantastic art. But what makes this series so addictive are the relationships, which are some of the most real and compelling in any medium."

SCOTT WEINSTEIN
SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE WEEKEND UPDATE WRITER

"*Love and Capes* continues to be one of the sharpest, funniest, most delightful comics available today, and 'What to Expect' takes it into brand-new territory in high style. It's 'Must-See TV,' in convenient comics form."

KURT BUSIEK
ASTRO CITY, SUPERMAN: SECRET IDENTITY

"*Love and Capes* remains the one idea I wish I'd gotten to before Zahler did and, despite my jealousy, remains one of my favorite comics, full of adventure, romance and heart."

MARK WAID
DAREDEVIL, INSUFFERABLE

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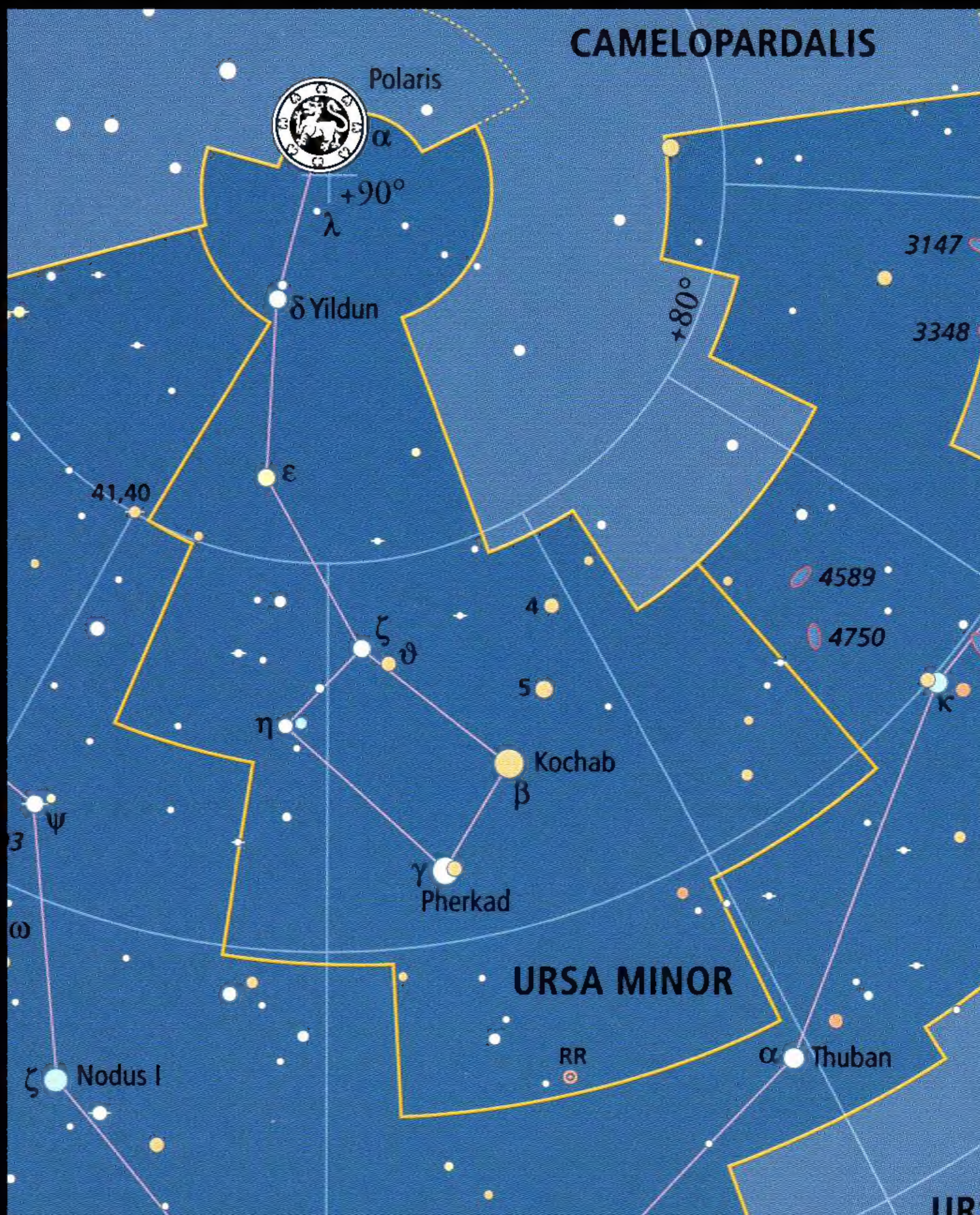

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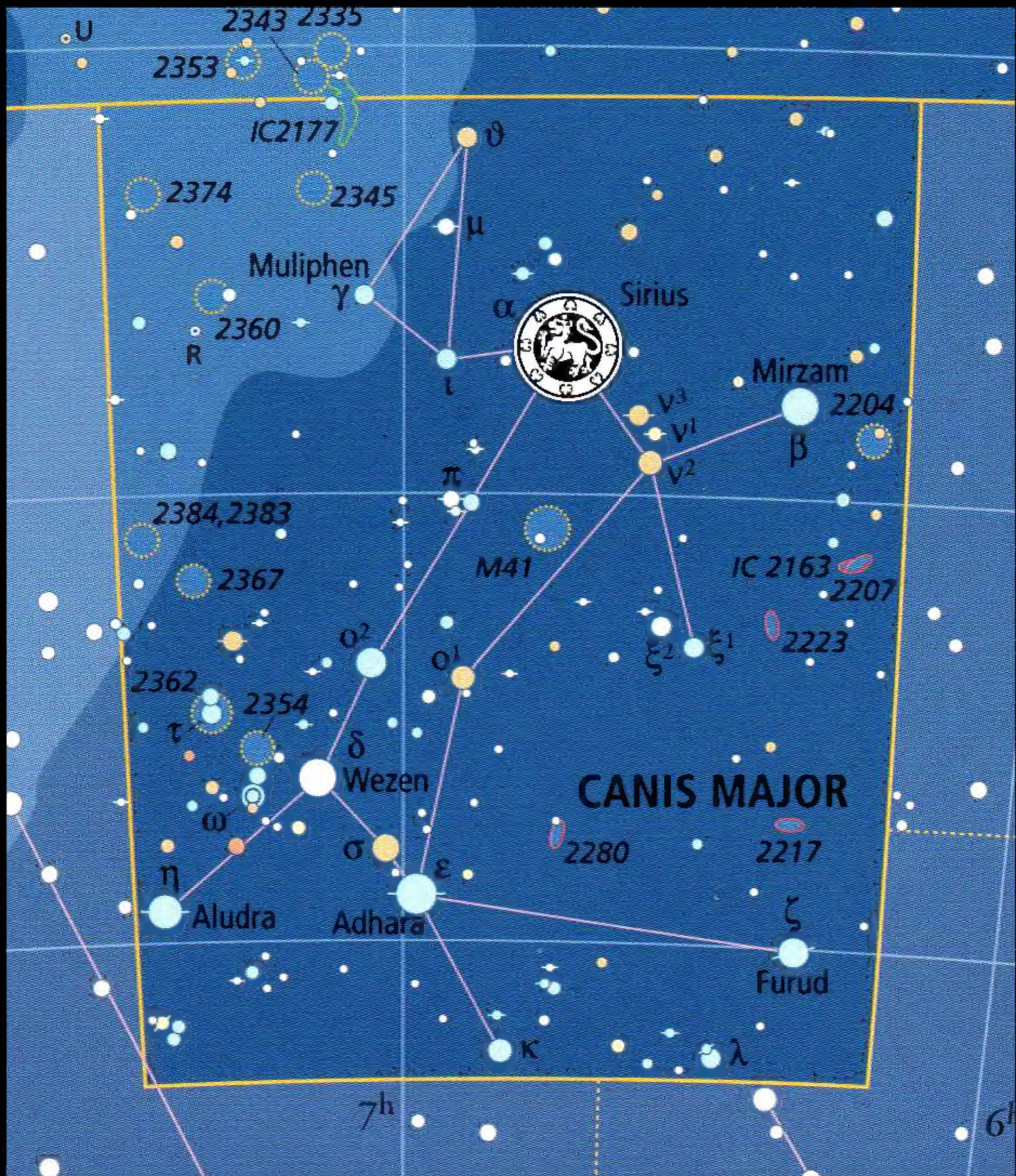

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